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**L E T T E R S**

**ON THE**

**PHILOSOPHY OF UNBELIEF.**

THE

OF

OF UNBELIEF

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OF JAMES WILSON

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THE

**L E T T E R S**

**ON THE**

**PHILOSOPHY OF UNBELIEF.**

**BY THE**

**REV. JAMES WILLS.**

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Καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος, ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ  
πονηρὰ αὐτῶν τὰ ἔργα.—ΕΤΑΓ. κατὰ ΙΩΑΝ. Κεφ. γ. 20.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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UNBELIEF is not confined to the professed unbeliever; neither is it the result of Reason. It is the offspring of the world and of human nature: a disease inherent in the mind, and more or less affecting every one. To explain this fact is the main intent of these letters. In this exposition there are two chief objects—first, that the professed believer may discern, as far as may be made perceptible to common sense, the circumstances of the progress and prominent natural causes of unbelief; and thus be enabled to estimate and guard against the influence of causes, which almost invariably operate under some fair disguise, and appear little connected with the effects which they produce: secondly, that he may not be seduced by the false pretensions of the infidel to superior reason.

Between the declared infidel and his opponent there is, it is to be feared, a gulph too broad to be crossed by the voice of reason—the mind resolved against conviction. The person who can be fortified against revealed religion, by arguments which if otherwise applied he would call sophisms, can scarcely be expected fairly to meet a question, which, as it depends at every step upon an appeal to consciousness and moral experience, stands therefore more peculiarly in need of candid construction. Neither can it

be hoped, that he who has refused to hear Paley and Bishop Butler, may be easily induced to read these humble and pretensionless letters. Nevertheless, the writer is not without some hope, that the more candid infidel may be in some degree attracted by the promise, to do what superior writers have not thought worth their labor—namely, to meet him on his own peculiar grounds, however unstable they may be to the step, or unreal to the eye.

The subject, thus viewed, is attended by some peculiar disadvantages. The combination of belief and unbelief, which is so manifest in the generality, while it is familiar enough to be too commonplace for detailed comment, is yet too great and irreconcilable to be easily allowed for to the full extent.

The pretension to philosophy, with which deism or atheism has so often plumed and tinselled itself before the admiring ignorance of the half-learned, is a fact equally marked by the same condition. The intellectual aberrations of reason, like the moral errors of sentiment, are marked by some striking inconsistencies. The popular deist not only rejects Christianity, without knowing what it is, or what are its proofs, but without even clearly understanding why he rejects it. He is armed with no reasons, or at most, with some unexamined sophism founded on the purest ignorance or the most absurd misstatements, yet he feels an intellectual pride in the boast of unbelief. He has contracted the idea, that infidelity is one and the same thing with philosophy. In other things, he has no pretension to superior knowledge: he is not aware of the arguments of famous deistical writers, and if he were, his common sense would reject them. His unbelief is in fact

the most implicit credulity, of which the weakest bigot, to a creed is liable to be accused.

Similarly the *Philosophic*—too refined for prejudice, too subtle to acquiesce in the reasons of the vulgar, and too ingenious to be content with the common sense which is applied to the ordinary affairs and knowledge of the kind—finds it necessary to invent a system of unbelief peculiar to himself. The trite quibbles of the illiterate scoffer, or of the superficial coxcomb in modern science, he will probably reject with the scorn of a keen and expert dialectician. But in exerting a subtlety of invention, which is rarely combined with the soundest discretion, he assumes first principles not warranted by experience, and attains conclusions with which it is directly at variance. Thus then, is the ground of infidelity unstable and uncertain; when it pretends to reason, at war with common sense and experience; and when it aims at common sense, rejected by right reason.

It remains to say a few words on the method which has been adopted, and first as to the division of the subject. First, unbelief is traced from its principles to the formation of professed and avowed deism. In this portion of the subject, the writer has been a little perplexed by his experience of the various forms in which unbelief appears: though still founded, in all, on the same principles, it may yet have presented itself in so many different phases to different observers, that there is no small risk in attempting to describe it to any one. But, on this the reader is requested to observe two important principles,

First, that the method here used is to show, how unbelief is a *natural, usual, and highly probable result* of certain

universal principles in human nature :—not, to describe the precise course in which these principles work in any given instance : and secondly, to include as much as possible, the most ordinary incidents of this method or course.

The general causes of unbelief are next exhibited as terminating in certain elementary objections, which are such as to suggest themselves in the natural course of the mind, and as arising thus spontaneously from the very first elements of the understanding, they are here called *primary*.

In discussing these, the method adopted has been to state and reply to those objections which are immediately formed from them, and which actually form the body of *popular* unbelief.

It was designed to include in this volume the discussion of the entire subject which the writer's plan comprehends. But in the course of printing the following sheets, he had reason to fear that this would extend the bulk and price of the volume beyond what its value may be deemed to admit of. The remainder is, therefore, reserved until it can be ascertained how far it may be desirable to publish it. It may be useful to guard against the charge of incompleteness, by mentioning the general heads of these parts thus reserved. Under the head of secondary or derived objections, the whole body of popular scepticism is attempted to be comprised under the following heads, viz.—Objections drawn from unwarranted assumptions of the divine attributes ; objections from abuse ; from sects ; objections from the scripture, and objections from natural history and science. Fourth and last, theoretical or speculative objections, being a brief review of the different theories

by which metaphysical writers have attempted to overthrow Christianity. These, with some notes, (containing the investigation of such points as the writer's desire to be clearly intelligible to the humblest reader induced him to exclude from the main text) would form another volume a little larger than the present.

The writer trusts that a few words may be excused in apology for such defects as, the intelligent reader cannot fail to perceive, might have been avoided by a little more care. It is now ten years since these letters were written, not with an immediate view to publication, but for the assistance of the writer's mind, in the frequent conferences which it has happened him to have with the class of persons for whose instruction they are ostensibly written. When after this long interval, the same motives, and the consideration that such a work may be found useful to many, prompted him to publish it, it happened at the same time that he became so engaged in writings of a periodical description, that, with the help of various other causes of interruption, it became impossible to afford so much attention as to avoid or correct many very prominent errors of style and method; some arising from an anxiety for condensation, and others from a wish to avoid common place—both carried too far for good taste. The writer trusts, nevertheless, that his views will be found sufficiently clear for those who read with regard to the real objects of the volume. Upon the thorough soundness of these views, and the truth of the facts on which they rest, the writer ventures to speak with a confidence founded upon long and patient observation and experience, under opportunities of the most favorable kind. Should an



**L E T T E R S**

**ON THE**

**PHILOSOPHY OF UNBELIEF.**



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\* By inadvertency headed Letter IV.

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# PHILOSOPHY OF UNBELIEF.

## PART I.

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### Origin of Unbelief.

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#### LETTER I.

##### FIRST PRINCIPLES.

You say that you are desirous to embrace the Christian faith ; and that you only await the solution of certain objections and difficulties, with which you think it to be embarrassed. I accept your pledge, and will endeavour, as well as I reasonably may, to satisfy this condition. But I must begin by frankly telling you, that I do not agree with you in the affirmation, that you are willing to become a believer,—or in supposing the course you suggest, to be the best adapted for that end : on the contrary, I rather fear, that although you may be compelled to admit that all your objections are satisfactorily removed, you shall yet find yourself as far as ever from the proposed result. It may nevertheless be attended with some advan-

tage, if you can be brought to admit, that whether the Christian religion be true or not, your scepticism, at least, has nothing better than error and infirmity for its foundation ; and if, upon a question of so much importance, you may henceforth be led to adopt a more cautious and a safer mode of enquiry.

It is a remarkable fact, that I never yet knew a Sceptic, who did not occasionally affirm his willingness to be a Believer. This is in part the effect of a very common species of self-deception, and partly a controversial expedient. It helps to set the conscience at rest, and to lend an appearance of honesty to unbelief. The first principle of the enquiry, on which I am about to enter, is the direct denial of this assertion. My first proposition is, that your disbelief is the direct and necessary result of your unwillingness to believe. And let me commence by reminding you of a remark, which you sometimes use upon subjects of a different kind, "Man believes or disbelieves, according to his inclination." No man is by nature inclined to be a follower of Christ. A wiser tongue than your philosophy can boast of, has applied your maxim, "Men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil."

If I may venture upon somewhat of a personal appeal : do you really imagine that a strong desire

to believe, or even an impartial temper, is indicated by the very refined and wire-drawn speculations, into which you are in the habit of escaping from a question of plain fact, of the evidence for which you are confessedly ignorant: would you really, as you sometimes say, give any thing to be able to believe in a revelation, the practical application of which seldom fails to elicit your scornful reprobation; the doctrines of which are at variance with your most cherished habits of mind; from which is to be drawn a rule of life, and even of thought, utterly at variance with the tasteful enthusiasm, the intellectual restlessness, and the spiritual indolence of your natural temper? When you assert, that you are desirous to believe what you are reluctant to investigate, can you suppose yourself serious? You admit, that if the gospel be true, it must be immeasurably the most momentous of all truths, and that all others compared with it are as nothing; notwithstanding which, you can contentedly remain in the most absolute ignorance upon the subject. You sometimes plead presumptive objections—sometimes ask for solutions of nugatory questions—sometimes you assert that you are incapable of believing—often that you are indolent, with a variety of evasive resources, which I shall have presently to mention in detail. In the mean time, what is all

this but the natural spirit of unbelief—the evasive system of a mind, unwilling to resign the imagined liberty and security of undisturbed scepticism upon a subject, which, seen as it appears to the unconverted mind, seems replete with undesirable renunciations and restrictions?

It is, indeed, impossible for any one who is but moderately endowed with self experience and observation, to affirm, with unqualified sincerity, that he is by nature otherwise than exceedingly averse from the severely spiritual system of true Christianity. On this point I may confidently refer you to the general consent of all the ethic writers, and all experience on the moral constitution of the human mind. No one who has any reasonable pretension to the knowledge of mankind, of books, or self, will hesitate to acknowledge the universal ascendancy of aspiring pride and self-seeking vanity. Nor will any one deny the almost unlimited dominion of impulses, which have their origin in those passions and appetites, which are the moving springs of social life. These are the trite and proverbial topics of the poets and moralists of all times. You cannot admit these familiar characters of our nature, and deny that man is by nature strongly indisposed to a system of self-denial, humility, and unreserved devotion to God. Upon this point you have frequently alleged, that so far from being by

nature disinclined to religion, you, on the contrary, felt in your disposition a strong tendency to religious feeling, and a deep sense of the greatness and benevolence of the Creator. To this it is to be replied, that this is not Religion in the proper sense—certainly not revealed Religion: but rather an element of human nature which was perhaps a part of its original adaptation to the service of God. In our present state it is oftener subservient to the uses of imagination—and, in its ordinary employment, more akin to poetry than religion. It does not in any way affect the conduct—it imposes no law—it throws no light upon the destinies of mankind. As it exists, a mere abstraction in the mind of the sceptic, it has nothing in it operative or vital: being entirely void of duties, forms, hopes, fears, affections, or motives. It is, withal, so arbitrary in its form, as to have already received nearly a thousand eccentric and uncouth distortions, from the philosophy of every age and nation. In a word, were it not that the mere existence of such a tendency, affords a strong corroboration of the evidence for Revealed Religion, by manifesting its adaptation to mankind; it might be not unreasonably adduced in opposition to the great maxim, that “Nature (God) does nothing in vain.” Were it not that it would be digressing too far from my course, I could easily satisfy you, that this natural



religion of which you boast, is far from being inconsistent with Atheism, which it constantly accompanies, at least in its more refined forms. The Atheist who worships nature, and denies God, is virtually on the same level with the more timid Sceptic, who confesses a Deity, but denies his Redeemer. The difference consists in the word only.

Neither can it reasonably be said, in opposition to this first principle, that men have at all times been addicted to superstition. The subject is one of great extent: but it is enough for our immediate purpose to observe, that this fact bears the same conclusions as the former, indicating the primitive intent of the Creator; and that with at least equal conclusiveness: for superstition is obviously the depravation of either a truth, or a natural principle, or both. Indeed, so far as it has any bearing upon the present point, it affords a strong confirmation of the truth of the proposition, that there is also in the heart of man so strong a repugnance to a revealed religion, which contains any thing of discipline, or imposes any spiritual bond, that when he cannot get rid of it in any other way, he will yet corrupt, pervert, and distort it into some correspondence with the natural infirmities of his state.

But to return from these evasive allegations, to

the plain fact which I desire to set before you : it is not the Divinity created by Poetry or Philosophy, or the equally ideal phantom of ignorant superstition, that I assert your reluctance to believe ; it is the actual God of Revealed truth, who is not the creature of fancy, but asserts the sovereignty of life, and of the heart and conduct of man. If any doubt remains, I refer you to the only authority the Christian, as such, professes to offer—the sacred volume ; a single extract from which, may be here sufficient to express what it is known to express or imply in every page. “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God : for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin ; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die : but if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the

body, ye shall live."—*ROM. chap. viii. v. 7 to 13 inclusive.*\* Now, surely, it is not to be affirmed that such is the condition of the Sceptic's mind, but that, for the most part, there is an extreme antipathy to the direction of conduct and sentiment which it implies. On the contrary, whether we look abroad on the world, or examine sincerely within the recesses of consciousness, all things afford unquestionable confirmation of the law of sin described by the apostle,† as opposed to the law of God. On this almost self-evident truth, therefore, it is unnecessary to say more ; nor do I fear that you will deem me too cursory, if I ask you to concede, that there is in the human heart a natural repugnance to Christianity.

From this predisposition of the affections,‡ it would not be difficult to infer a proportional pre-

\* "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth."—*Col. c. iii. v. 1, 2*

† *Rom. vii. 22. 23.*

‡ This is only one of the many causes, which work together for the same end: not merely motives of affection and inclination, but also common maxims imperfectly understood—ill habits of thought arising from defective or false conceptions—or influences arising from the combined reaction of other minds—all these and more are in daily operation, to corrupt the understanding, and promote that system of self-illusion, which is always more or less at work in every human mind, and with respect to all subjects of thought. Insomuch that one of the main operations of right reason, is to disentangle itself from the misguiding effects of sense, sentiment, passion, and habit; and to attain just views of truth by abstractions, which are more laborious, as the subject is more involved in the proverbial knowledge or the popular concerns of mankind.

disposition of the understanding. But it is now my purpose, to shew that there is a predisposing cause in the constitution of the understanding itself; which, while it retards the assent of the mind to all facts which are merely to be deduced as inferences from reasoning, most peculiarly affects the understanding in its assent to spiritual truths. That impression or sense of belief, whereby the mind regards any object of thought as actually existing, is capable of two very important main distinctions, founded upon the different means by which the knowledge of these objects is obtained. First, there is a sense of belief founded on actual perception and habitual experience of consequences. To the same class may be also referred the similar assent, founded on probable grounds, in all matters connected with, or immediately deducible from the former. Of these it is the general character, that in them the mind is affected by distinct conceptions, and aided by those circumstantial analogies, which mainly constitute the habitual experience of mankind. Second, distinguished from these is the assent which the understanding gives to a proposition, on the ground that it is legitimately to be inferred from admitted facts or principles, according to certain established rules of reasoning.

Now the importance of this distinction consists

in this : that the first mentioned methods are those chiefly concerned in the conduct of the affairs of this world, and the common uses of human thought ; and supply the main motives of human action ; in such a manner that the impression of *actual existence* entertained in matters relating to the common affairs of life, is chiefly founded upon education, perception, and habit ; and that this impression is maintained with difficulty, or not at all, when these means cease to give their assistance. You have but to reflect a little upon the usual course of human affairs, to perceive how little reasoning, in the stricter sense, has to do with them. The experience of the senses—the strict discipline of education—the established routine and settled courses in all important concerns—the guidance of example, and the effect of combination and system,—these rule the whole conduct of ordinary existence. Men are seldom engaged in any pursuits, the object of which may not, in some way, be reduced either to the information of the senses, or to some engrafted habit of the mind. In these there is a *practical confidence* in results, arising from habit. The consequences and objects of attainment in any course of action are realized to the conception, by the constant recurrence of visible and tangible objects with which they are con-

nected ; and by the similar results observed in the concerns of the rest of the world. Thus, then, in the ordinary uses of human thought, there *is little occasion* for the search after an inference by means of a chain of reasoning : a brief process of comparison and recollection, and this, too, grounded upon experience, leads to the furthest inference required in matters of common occurrence. In the active occupations of real life, we tread upon a path of custom and experience, so beaten that it needs not to be looked for, and so thronged, that it can seldom occur to question its accuracy of direction. We are led on from hour to hour by influences, impressions, strong motives and habits, with a blind force ; and the interference of reasoning would appear not merely ineffectual, but trifling. In all the pursuits of man, courses of action so established as to admit of little appeal to principle, regulate the conduct, the understanding, and, to a great extent, even the very perceptions of sense. So that even on those occasions, when reasoning is actually resorted to, the process is still so modified, as to be generally influential only in proportion as it is accompanied and enforced by these habitual means.

From this it seems to be an evident consequence that, when the understanding becomes cognizant

of facts, which are, either in their own nature, or on account of the means by which they are offered to the understanding, remote from these habitual processes of the mind ; it must receive and entertain them by a process different in *principle*, as well as degree of intensity, from that in which the habitual facts of daily experience are received. To make this important distinction as plain as I can : in those matters which constitute the business of mankind, we do not so much assent to stated conclusions or distinct propositions, as think, feel, or act according to impressions received from circumstance, or recalled by it. By constant habit, the understanding is more or less susceptible of these. Or if actual reasoning should be employed, in this the steps as well as the conclusion are mostly of the same character as above described ; the mind, by means of certain rapid operations, so habitual as to be unconscious, proceeds, as it were *per saltum*, from one familiar fact to another, to a conclusion which is still within the limits of habitual observation and experience, and which thus becomes at once realized to the conception. Such is the *habitual* method. The other proceeds by a chain of thoughts or propositions, not necessarily reducible to distinct conceptions ; of which the perfection of every one is necessary to the conclu-

sion. This conclusion may be entirely beyond the scope of conception, and is then to be received on the authority of its proof.

Of these two methods, the former or *habitual* assent is independent of the reasons by which, if called into question, it might be confirmed; the latter, or *inferential*, is entirely dependent on them. But as this distinction rather exists in the nature of the mind than of things, any part of our knowledge may be supposed capable of either form.\* Thus there is a habitual sense of the effect of a fall from some great height; while the theory of the earth's form and motion is, to the generality even of educated persons, an acknowledged but *unconceived* conclusion of reason. The one is seemingly opposed to our perceptions; the other overpowers them. We shudder over the precipice—but cannot help doubting that we are glancing on through space, with the most inconceivable velocity and on the most complicated path: how widely different will it be felt at once, is the species of assent which the mind gives to these different facts; yet it may

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\* The distinction here pointed out exists only with reference to the constitution of the mind. That which is a habitual conception to one, may be a remote abstraction to another. To use that simple idiom, which metaphysical word-splitting alone has rendered objectionable, one mind may obtain an idea of that which another has only reached a proof of. It is in the uncertainty of the line of demarcation, that the fear of being misunderstood consists. But the application here designed avoids this disadvantage.



be as truly observed that, of these instances, the consequence involved in the first is *at least* as difficult to prove *by reasoning* as the last.

What makes this distinction require particular attention, is that Revealed Religion affords us, in a very high degree, instances of both. To the Sceptic, it is a speculative result ; to the Believer, a habit of sentiment as well as reason. Natural Scepticism begins mostly with an effort to reduce truths, which lie beyond the limits of the understanding, within the ordinary law of habitual conceptions. Faith, the operation of which is more accordant with the actual nature both of man and of Revealed Religion, is not the less founded in reason. The true point of distinction, which is apt to be totally overlooked between them, is not that the Sceptic is one who asks for proof, and the Believer one who believes without it: but that the Sceptic asks for an explanation, and the Believer is satisfied with proof. Before we proceed further, therefore, I must beg that you will attentively mark this important condition of the question : that it is not in the difficulty of unravelling those mysteries, upon which the Sceptic often wastes so much absurd complaint, that the force of the principle consists : but in the difficulty of comprehending *any thing* beyond the sphere of perception and

habit, *so as to make it an impulsive principle of action.* We are, therefore, at the outset, exonerated from the necessity of supposing that Scepticism is founded on any admissible question, as to the truth of that which it rejects : as it is sufficient that there is a strong antecedent difficulty ; which is no objection to the facts, but a deficiency in the mind itseif.

And if you will here choose to object, that this defective constitution is in itself an objection ; I answer, that it is strictly conformable with all we know of the will of God, and the observable constitution of the moral world, that faith should be essentially connected with habitual piety. It should be a sufficient reply, that it (faith) exists according to those very conditions to which it is attached in Scripture : one of the happiest proofs of which is, that its doctrines are not only wonderfully adapted to the nature of man, but contain the most beautiful system of profound design for its amelioration.

I do not here speak of the commonly noticed limit of the understanding, as a cause of Scepticism ; because, further than implied in the principle above explained, I do not admit that it has any such effect : Scepticism begins before inquiry. That these intellectual defects, if we may so call

them, are highly favourable to the sceptical disputant, I admit, and shall hereafter have to notice in detail. But I now only demand the concession, that there is in the constitution of the human understanding, as well as in the moral constitution of man, a predisposition to Unbelief in Revealed Religion. And that from the nature of this predisposition, there is a *practical unbelief*, quite consistent with that kind of *speculative assent*, which depends on proof.

This principle affords the true answer to the question, Why is not the evidence of divine truth more plain to the understanding : for, first observing that it is full, clear, and conclusive enough for all who examine it honestly, it is to be added, that according to the present constitution of our nature, no additional degree of *inferential* proof could meet the difficulty ; as it consists, not in the degree of the evidence, but in *the nature of the assenting process* of the mind. Before this correspondence ends, I will revert to this point, and make it, I trust, abundantly clear, that there is no want of evidence. If one rose from the grave, to confirm the Scriptures to you, powerful as the impression might be, it would still have but a momentary effect. The recollection, uncorroborated by habitual impressions, and the daily ex-

perience of the senses, would fade away from your memory, like the recollection of a dream. Were your reason ever so fully convinced, I cannot too often remind you, that, until the habits of daily action and thought are engaged in confirming such impressions, they cannot be either operative or permanent.

Thus, although the proof of Revealed Religion is unanswerably strong, and plain enough for the dullest who will seek it ; yet, for the best understanding, something more than the *mere assent to proof*, is necessary for one so constituted as man. The strongest understanding must for ever find its unaided faculties insufficient, to quicken bare belief into the *operative* principle of faith. In trusting to this effort consists the error of those, who endeavour to realize the doctrines of Scripture into practical conceptions, without having recourse to those means which are actually appointed. And were this letter addressed to a person of this class, I might dwell on the consideration, that were such the proper method, it is not likely that He who has so amply provided us with means, suited to our moral and intellectual state, would have left us without some notions, more distinct than his Word actually affords, upon those well evidenced, but inscrutable facts, which are so often con-

verted into stumbling blocks by the wisdom of this world.

Whatever may be the constitution of the mind, no one can hold a reasonable doubt, that the constitution of the social state is highly unfavorable to Revealed Religion. The beauty of its precepts, with their obviously beneficial tendency; together with the irrefragable force of its evidences, which are such as to be unassailable, without rejecting all the rules of right reason and common sense; these, with many other causes, operate to enforce from the world a formal assent, which may be considered as an involuntary tribute to truth, something analogous to that which vice is said to pay to virtue. The unbelief of the world is not speculative dissent, but practical indifference; and, were it an object worth while, might be deduced as a corrolary from the principle already established: the social state is but a result from its constituent elements: society is but the aggregate of individuals; with, however, these attendant circumstances; that the collected influence of the whole operates on every part, and generates customs, maxims, opinions and impulses, which affect both the conduct and feeling of every individual. But first let us see as to the fact.

Now for this, I must appeal to your experience,

and ask whether it is not sufficiently obvious to admit of no doubt : That the whole social system is organized exclusively for the purposes of this life only ; to favour its desires, and to forward its concerns. While the concerns of our future state are but indistinctly manifested within the sphere of sensation, and are made perceptible only to the inward eyes of reason and faith ; the objects of this transitory state occupy every sense and feeling, and crowd the fore-ground of our existence. Thus it is quite apparent, that the affairs of commerce, law, and politicks possess all the main arrangements of the world, and that ambition, avarice, taste, and the love of present enjoyment, with all the varied excitements they form, have their equally sovereign prevalence in the inner recesses of domestic life. I do not enter upon the question, as to the fitness or unfitness of this order of things ; but merely state it as a fact, on which to found an inference. The actual observance of the Christian Religion is—unless in what may be called the religious circles—hidden from the eye of the world, as much as a formal institution can admit of. That is, always, except at those stated seasons, when the instituted rites of worship are brought into a very unequal collision with the imposing pomp and splendour of

the world. Thus, although the multitude, with the known inconsistency of individuals, would rise to vindicate against open profanation, those truths the spirit of which they set at nought; yet there is no doubt that a practical denial of the truth, thus formally recognised, is broadly and legibly stamped on the whole fabric of the social world, and characterizes all its commerce, and is mingled even with its most sacred institutions. It would appear to be trifling, were I to waste many words in proof of this universally visible fact; as there is no moment of waking existence—no business of mankind—no meeting of persons, that does not more or less exemplify it. And, in truth, if it were less apparent, it would still be enough, that an object which is admittedly of more weight than all others put together, should be deemed on all occasions worthy to be *only formally* recognized; and be set aside on all occasions, and for the slightest purposes that accident can give birth to.

But, not to diverge into common-places, however just—let us see what must be the practical effect of this perverted disposition. Is it not apparent that, in the first place, it deprives Religion of that universal source of habitual influence, which flows from social tendency, and the established order of things. The conviction enforced

by universal consent, the impulse of communicated feeling—these, while they encourage, prompt, and sway men in every earthly pursuit, are utterly lost in this. What is more, these important influences work to produce the opposite effect upon the individual mind; and, with a force difficult to withstand, seem to convey to each the conclusion of the whole. A moment's reflection may be enough to dissipate the specious illusion; but the reflection passes away, and the illusion remains. Those concerns which are followed with so much grave and intelligent sagacity, cannot easily be set down at their small comparative worth. And those who prosecute the business of the world, with so many imposing virtues and pretensions, cannot, without some abstraction of the mind from a strong customary sense, be looked on as fools to themselves, and rebels against the God, whose paramount authority they admit and defy. I am so desirous to use no facts that may be doubtful, or require more than the commonest observation, that I forbear to dwell upon the specious fallacies which are interwoven with human opinion, and which form the chief ground-work of self-delusion. I may just observe, however, that to detail them here, would be but to anticipate a part of our enquiry; as they, in fact, form the mode of ope-



ration, of which I have been stating the efficient principles. Good and evil are, it is admitted, inseparably blended in the whole texture of sublunary affairs ; but the evil is discreetly concealed, and the good ostentatiously labelled on the outward surface : so that it truly requires much thought, to bring home to the understanding the proverbial truth that "all is vanity:" that the whole of human affairs is a pile of transient nothingness, error, and guilt : and that the Truth, which the practice of the world seems to stamp as having but a subordinate value, is all that is worth concern. The effect, then, of this *practical contradiction*, is, as might be expected, to impress each individual, as if it conveyed the strong sense of the world. Thus, too, while the evil impulses of our nature are at rest, and the private motives to unbelief are not in actual operation ; the individual is still carried on by the broad current of human tendencies, in which he exists : so that the specious influence of the causes we have detailed, is combined with the force of a vast system ; and every thing around contributes, though in some insensible degree, to delude, or perpetuate delusion. And though the conscience, from time to time, is heard to whisper that all is not right ; yet it is easy to silence so quiet, and

subdued a voice ; to enter into good resolves ; and to calm reflection, amidst the imposing noise, glare, and interest of this visible scene of things.

We have now, I trust, sufficiently established the first principles of our enquiry ; and shewn, by the statement of undeniable facts—the only reasonable method for the attainment of moral inferences—that mankind is by nature predisposed to unbelief in spiritual truths ; and that this predisposition peculiarly affects the Christian religion. Whether we reflect upon the affections and passions, wherewith we are constituted, with their almost resistless energy ; or the Intellect, with its expansive desires, and bounded perceptions, together with its feeble influence in the practical conduct of life ; or whether we take into account that which is the result of both, the state and tendencies of the social world ; it would seem, without pursuing the subject any farther, to be an easy inference, that scepticism is the natural and necessary result : and thus that it is sufficiently to be accounted for, without laying it to the charge of any imperfection in the evidences of Christianity, which are fully as strong as the nature of the facts, our state, and the plan of God, admit of. For, without giving undeserved credit to the reasoning powers of the sceptic, it is indeed notorious, that he

seldom knows any thing either of the evidences or the objections; and that voluntary ignorance has by far the more considerable share in his dissent from sacred truth.

We may now go on to trace, as distinctly as we may, the primary operations of these principles.

I am, &c.

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## LETTER II.

### PROGRESS OF UNBELIEF.

Before we proceed to the detailed application of the principles established in the former letter, it may be useful to corroborate this application, by reminding you of a fact, of which no thinking man can be ignorant—that these principles are not peculiar to the subject upon which we are now engaged. This is but a case of that great problem, upon which the human mind is fixed with universal and almost incessant study, namely, to reconcile prudence and right with inclination and desire. Whether it may be the still, small voice of conscience, or the sense of future ill, or the care for future interest, that interposes to resist a present purpose ; still, if there should chance to be some impulse of awakened desire, kept alive by present objects, you must be aware how little the suggestions of reason, prudence, or duty, avail to subdue this prevailing desire. Such is the universal progress of moral evil, in almost all its workings, and the secret history of the most fatal and prevalent ills of life. The common effects

of imprudence and vice attest its truth in every scene of life; and these examples are justly understood by the common sense of mankind: yet, notwithstanding a thousand wretched examples of this uniform tendency of imprudence and guilt, they have little force to deter folly from its gay and thoughtless career. The human heart is armed with an inexhaustible store of trite expedients to blind itself to the palpable futurity, even of this life. But transfer this machinery of self-illusion to that more vague, but important future, which it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive, and you cannot fail at once to acknowledge the immense accession of power, which it must obtain.

We must now trace the actual progress of unbelief from the operation of our proposed conditions. In doing this, we are not under the necessity of beginning by the absurd assumption of the Deist; that, if revealed religion is to stand upon its evidence, we are therefore to assume that every believer must receive it as being sufficiently proved; and, that every unbeliever rejects it on the opposite ground. The Christian religion, though actually resting upon the very highest evidence that our understanding can receive, consistently with the nature of the facts—is yet, for

its general reception amongst men, quite independent of what is commonly meant by the term *proof*. The Gospel is received by the civilized world on that kind of moral evidence, which results from the fact that it is itself the real basis of the morals of civilized countries. I speak not here of that peculiar spiritual testimony, which it carries home to the Christian mind. It is also received on *the understanding* that it is supported by irrefragable proofs; which, though continually assailed, have still remained unshaken through so many ages: these proofs are supposed to subsist in the repositories of all solid truth that is known to mankind—ready to be produced when called for; and it is thus supposed by all persons of practical understanding, to rest on the consent of the united wisdom of past and present times; and finally, it is fixed by education amongst the earliest lessons of childhood. Thus, although the gospel of Christ is effectively established upon the first principles of all right reason, the belief of the world is the *immediate* result of habit and education, and not of reasoning. It is a state of mind, and not an inference. Were it not thus, neither religion nor any other principle of action could exist, otherwise than in the retirements of abstruse learning. If you shall choose to demur to this, you have

only to question any practical man, (in the usual style of the sceptic,) upon the grounds of that confidence with which he commits his means to the operation of commercial causes ; and you will discover, that the faith which you decry as unreasonable is one of the main principles of human action : and that so far as regards this principle, the real difference between the two applications consists in the comparatively keen and active interest, which men take in all that belongs to their *immediate* concerns. In the business of life, though they may not clearly comprehend a hundredth part of its intermediate processes, the understanding is filled with the anticipations of *conceivable results*. The force of human faith, in ordinary things, rests not in the clearness of proof so much as in the distinctness with which the conclusion can be conceived : and habit, which confers this distinctness in worldly objects, can also remedy the obscurity, or supply the place of imperfect conceptions of spiritual truths.

Of belief and unbelief the cases are probably as various as the modifications of human character ; but, avoiding all unnecessary distinctions, we may fairly assume that general state of habitual religious belief, which is the effect of education, preserved by formal observance ; and which, without having

obtained complete possession of the mind, just extends so far as a general reverence for sacred subjects. This is the most common case, and the simplest. It will therefore afford us the least embarrassed view of the series of mental operations, which terminate in avowed unbelief. As we proceed, the application of our principles to more difficult cases will become perceptible.

We have seen, that religious sentiment, however acquired, is subject to a constant counteraction from sentiments of an opposite tendency; which, for the most part, act with much greater power. And this, were I engaged in the construction of a metaphysical theory, would lead, with a force almost demonstrative, to all I desire to establish. Here, it is as true in moral as in physical science, that of two directly counteracting forces, the stronger will prevail. But I may honestly say, with an incomparably higher authority, *non fingo hypotheses*: I am most desirous, with scrupulous fidelity, to keep within the boundary of experience; and to say nothing that, in point of fact, can be questioned. I trust this may also be received as an apology for the minuteness, with which I feel myself occasionally obliged to detail, as dwell upon, apparently commonplace truths. But, to return: we have also established, that



religious belief is unsupported, either by the habits of the understanding, or by the constitution of society. An observable consequence is, that in a great many instances, it becomes entirely inactive in the mind ; and in the nature of a latent principle, which, though it can occasionally be excited into action, yet has no effect under ordinary circumstances. This state, which is actually the unbelief of the world, is not necessarily subject to either increase or diminution ; nor does it, in the multitude of cases, lead either to piety or scepticism.

There are, at the same time, many, who, from the character of their minds, (not to speak of accidental causes,) cannot acquiesce in this neutral state : reflection will, though indistinctly, shew, and human feeling shudder at, its fearful termination. And, whether they arise from circumstances or natural temper, these awful gleams of spiritual sanity will, according as they are more or less frequent and distinct, lead to varied consequences. In all cases, *it is mental conflict* ; and tends to disturb the mind as to the future, and dissatisfy it with the present : and *consequently*, must tend to impel it to seek relief against such troubled reflections.

This relief, some will seek in prayer and sacred

study, some from forgetfulness, some from reason, and some from sophistry. The case, when once agitated, is not one of indifference ; it is a trial between conscience and all the passions—between the world, which speaks with strong allurements to every outward sense, and an inbred but vague conviction, which appeals to none.

When once, therefore, the mind enters upon this inward strife, and actually begins to hesitate between conscientious motives and inclinations of an opposite tendency, it is at once evident that this contest must be unequal. On one side is an indolent sense of the imperfectly comprehended motives of religion, from which every day takes something of its influence ; on the other, all those active desires, and all those growing habits, the influence of which becomes more peremptory and less contested, as they obtain longer possession. Under this condition, we may suppose the course of unbelief toward avowed dissent to have begun. It is a state of mind too common and obvious to require much explanation—to those who have in any degree experienced it. For those who have not had this experience, I will refer them to a familiar parallel operation, common to all. There is nothing within the range of human observation, so impressive in its character and visible

consequences, as death. It is of all, most feared and least regarded. Nothing when seen is so shocking—when absent, so unthought of. Has it occurred to you to notice the progress of this peculiar fact? The earliest intimations of that awful change, usually awaken a solemn and melancholy sense in the youthful, who are, in the course of nature, furthest removed from the grave: while the hardened veteran of threescore, who has seen the world of his youthful days depart, can scarcely bring home to his mind, that a few more brief circles of the year must remove him also from the living world. The passing-bell sounds unheard above the noon-day stir of life, and the funereal pomp carries not its true significance to the eye. It is not that death has really become a matter of indifference, or that its sensible approach has lost any of its real terrors; but that, like the truths of the eternal world, its thoughts are put away from us, and its known intimations elaborately disguised; and, what is more to our purpose, habitually looked on with disregard. Similarly, in the course of no long time, those affecting religious truths, which are in themselves so impressive, and so adapted to work upon the sincere believer's nature, fade away from the presence of the mind, and leave nothing more than common-places of

language, too familiar to the ear to awaken any feeling.

In this progress of the mind to unbelief, I have said that there is a continued struggle between conscience and inclination; which takes place in various degrees and forms, according to the varying relations of these elements. In this conflict it is not necessary to suppose any additional causes; the absence of spiritual desires—feeble conceptions of spiritual objects—the predominance of worldly objects, motives, and influences—the force of habits—the example of mankind—are adequate causes, too frequent and familiar to require any elaborate argument. There are yet many other circumstances, which though contingent are common still. The Infidel's progress is seldom attended by reasoning, and yet as it is commonly pretended and occasionally does happen, it is right here to assume its instrumentality: we shall thus also obtain the most comprehensive statement of the Infidel's progress.

If instead of taking refuge either in prayer and the ordinary means of divine grace, or in the serious study of the actual evidences of Christianity, (a course rarely followed,) the sceptically disposed person has recourse to those casual appeals to reason, which often characterize the progress of un-

beliefs, at first sight apparent; that, in the case assumed, the *true question* cannot be said to be before the mind. The true question relates to the genuineness and authenticity of the scriptures; the actual question in the unbeliever's mind, to the possibility, reason, meaning, and operation of their facts and doctrines. This would, of itself, determine the result; for, whatever might be the conclusion of such speculations, no degree of fitness or sufficiency, *perceivable by the human understanding*, can of itself convey to an unwilling mind the demonstrative evidence of divine original. The unbeliever is not, however, likely to come to such *sound conclusions*. Such speculations, even were they conducted by the profoundest genius, must of course tend to produce but error and uncertainty. In the repetition of these fruitless questions, the sceptical sense must necessarily acquire the force of habit; and *repeated failure generates increasing doubt*, while it also excites added reluctance and dislike. The question is, therefore, at each successive trial, more cursorily dismissed and less fairly stated. The very same processes moral, mental, and social, which lead to the question, tend effectually to unfit the mind for its discussion. For as the truth of God is opposed to the habitual tendencies of the unbeliever, the first principles of his rea-

sonings: are in themselves likely to be fallacious; and this the more, as one of the most common errors of men is a voluntary self-sophistication, for the purpose of suppressing conscience, and to promote a favourite tendency. Thus by slow degrees perhaps, but at last, the unbeliever shall have entrenched his understanding in a set of principles *themselves the results of unbelief*. Meanwhile the primary causes still operate, with incessant force to accelerate this course. The vicious affection alienates the mind; the treacherous reason misleads it; and the noiseless yet vast force of the public mind, as it enforces discretion, and sanctions indifference, still confirms it in each new stage. After some vain efforts therefore, to bring down heavenly things to the dark level of human sight, and to look with purblind eye into the mind of Infinite Wisdom, the understanding is deprived of those actual perceptions, with which it was constituted for the purpose of true religion; the heart becomes hardened, darkened, and alienated; and unspiritual desires acquire sanction and authority: until at last *doubt itself becomes a habit*, and inseparably associated with religion in the heart. ~~The direct~~

and see (The reader may see these exemplified in page 77) to the

consequences must at last be the abandonment of all serious thoughts upon the subject. This is the last stage to which unbelief ordinarily arrives in the continued cessation of thought upon the subject, which thus, not being maintained by either feelings, sentiments, actions, reflections, or facts, loses all traces of existence in the thoughts. Such is a summary view of the operations which lead to unbelief. They form a course so perceptibly consequent upon the principles stated in my first letter, that I have not thought it necessary to pursue this part of the subject at any great length.

In considering these thoughts, it will be a useful help to you to conceive the attainment of the state here described as the slow result of time. It may enable you the more easily to feel that we are not now engaged in the steps of an argument—but rather aiming to gain a distinct view of a course of natural and common changes of the mind. States of mind are easily denied for the sake of argument, and however familiar, demand a little attentive thought to perceive their modifications, or even distinctly to recollect them, when past: the affirmation of them must invariably be an appeal to experience and fairness. In these changes, as I have said, the mind may be

conceived to pass, in a wavering course, through many slow gradations—through all of which [its experiences an increasing alienation, characterized by mental conflicts of continually decreasing interest. And the difficulties which occur in this course are to be best understood, as operating to deaden the piety long before they destroy the belief. In this stage, *practical* distrust is very commonly united with the *assent of the understanding*. The force of evidence (if ever known) is perhaps recollected vaguely, or the prescription of time and public authority respected. But the disease has begun in the heart, which goes on hourly hardening itself against a law of obligation, which bears not the current sanction of the world, yet claims to be heard above its noise, and overrule its proud authorities and tendencies. The difficulty of substituting the remote for the familiar—the occasional for the habitual—and the austere, sedative for the excitingly stimulant—produces the natural effect. And if, even under these disadvantages, the real evidences of revealed truth should by any chance be presented to the attention, still the great apparent magnitude of its requisitions is thrown into the opposite scale. What is to be seemingly relinquished is more than the unbeliever can anticipate in return.



For it is only from experience that it can be known that the religion of Jesus Christ has, within itself, assisting, preventing, exalting, and soothing influences, which makes its ways pleasantness and its paths peace. In the entire absence of this experience, the mind shrinks from a strife beyond which it cannot see, and which only seems to offer a painful yet inadequate control. It is, in fact, to this wavering sense that the words of our Redeemer have a peculiar application, "No man putting his hand to the plough, and turning back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

From this state the progress to actual disbelief is quite apparent: it is, indeed, so much like a necessary consequence, that it is rather to be wondered at that it does not more universally occur.

The next step is that in which the unbeliever becomes distinctly aware that he is such. His previous progress has been an effort of the moral nature to shake off a painful sense of doubt; and to realize conceptions, to which some vague and indefinite notion of authority has continued to cling. But, in the course of time, the question has been, by a nice and refined gradation, as it were reversed. From calling in question the authority of sacred truths, it has degenerated into an occasional

misgiving, as to the validity of the unbeliever's doubt. The first stage was probably attended by a certain feeble, hesitating desire, to be convinced; the last only impels to get quit of the question. The reflecting unbeliever must appease all fear and doubt, and find some species of self-justification. If he is a proud, solitary, sensitive heart, against censures, of amiable and serious, he must fortify himself against the imputation, which, to an unthinking person, seems to be contained in the charge of irreligion. With these natural causes, there are others, too, of an artificial kind. The unbeliever is not left to pursue this course, without the frequent assistance of others: he meets at every stage the taunt, scorn, encouragement, the sneer, or sophism, to inspire, cheer, and assist him in his downward course. He is also urged forward by the injudicious and ignorant opposition of good, but incompetent Christians, who neither know the real force of the Sceptic's doubt, nor the strange windings and fallacies of natures subtler than their own. In a word, the unbeliever learns that he has a question to decide with others as well as with his own mind, and that he must *definitively* settle whether the religion of the Gospel is true or false.

(Scepticism, viewed as the result of education,

nor of prodigies and evil communication, although abundantly existing, needs no comment. But the external effect upon the world of those standard elementary workings, with which we are there concerned. If we trace it successfully into its more specious recesses, and in its more amiable forms, the rational and virtuous sceptic will be satisfied.

The tendency of this progress, so far as we have pursued it, is often to the formation of certain inferior modifications of Christianity, by means of which it is in reality deprived of its spirit and power, and this is, not unfrequently, the intermediate stage, in which the transition we have been describing takes place; in which unbelief may be considered as stealing from the heart into the head. The very same course which leads some to deny the truth of the religion of the gospel, leads others to refine it away.

Unwilling wholly to reject the revered authority of an instituted worship, and equally reluctant to submit to its real requisitions; numerous persons fall into a compromise, important alike from its fallacious, and universal character. And it is the more to be noticed here, as constituting the broad level of practical unbelief, in which the principles which we have been discussing betwixt

rally terminate. The operation of this illusion consists in overlooking all of religion that is not conformable to the inclinations and narrow-sighted expedencies of mankind. Of this, the immediate effect, and then an aggravating cause, is the habit of observing the formal parts of worship, without taking any notice of its essential doctrines and spiritual character. A religion Christian but in name, and wholly destitute of all its spirit, is unconsciously constructed out of the very irreligion of the world. To the individual, this fallacy is authorized by the outward conduct of society. A surface morality built on expediency, with the help of that natural self-illusion on which we have dwelt so much, easily misleads him into an implicit conviction that he sees the whole of Christianity in the crowd who do outward homage at its temples. He also reflects that the whole world cannot be wrong, and that he is not amongst the worst. He looks on the amiable and specious side of his own character, and magnifies his prudential or constitutional virtues into merits in the sight of God. He scans the frailties of the good and the scandalous lives of the wicked ; and looking on himself rather with the eyes of the world than the internal consciousness of the soul, he concludes that so much fair reputation, amiable feeling, and comparative worth cannot but amount

to something in the scale of infinite justice. He considers that he cannot be obliged to be better than every one else. And if he should be acquainted with some persons of stricter conduct, he applies a severer scrutiny to their lives, or gets rid of the troublesome implication, by the ready and flippant charge of enthusiasm. He will say, that the bulk of mankind are incapable of such intense excitement, or such ascetic isolation from the common dispositions of their nature; this therefore cannot be the design of their benevolent Creator. This common fallacy I shall have to notice when it again occurs in another form, amongst the objections of the deist, from which the character here described is separated by a slight and ineffective partition.

By these and such reflections, the merely nominal Christian succeeds in filing away all that he does not choose to observe of religion, until he has reduced it down to the level of his own standing in the social scale.

This is but one of the many forms of that process, in which the human mind has, from the earliest ages, been engaged—in warping the pure institutions of God into the mould of human corruption. The religion of human invention, distinguished from that of divine revelation, has this amongst its peculiar characteristics, that it

takes its form from the manners, morals, and prevalent customs of the age or country to which it belongs; and is coloured by fanaticism, superstition, or the assumption of a nominal philosophy, as the interests of the government, the passions of the people, or the degree of knowledge and civilization of the time, work to transform it from the pure and simple, but austere spiritual revelation, which equally levels to the dust both ecclesiastical formalism, and academic philosophizing; and does not admit of form in the place of spirit—superstition instead of explicit revelation—or any rules, however seemingly expedient, of human convention, in place of the Gospel of Christ.

Though such are the constant aberrations of mankind in regard to religion, there is in the conscience of every reasonable and well educated person of the present day, a sort of indolent sense that notions of religion, such as I have described, are not quite conformable to the reality. The subject is now and then brought too clearly before the understanding, not to be attended by some doubts; and the essential truths of revealed religion are too plainly announced, for self delusion to draw any encouragement from the Scripture. Thus, even this poor substitute for the saving and enlightening truth does not always afford sufficient repose to the reflecting mind and

sensitive conscience. And it would not be too much to assert, that a merely formal religion, constructed upon the errors and frailties of human nature, is the great level from which infidelity arises, and from which its reasoning derives its force, matter, and efficiency. Of this, however, we shall be better qualified to speak hereafter.



### LETTER III.

#### ORIGIN OF SCEPTICAL OBJECTIONS.

Many are the individual causes and courses, by which actual and professed disbelief arises from that state, of which I have, in my last letter, endeavoured to trace the development. Some persons have a natural hardihood of character, which prompts them to seize upon bold conclusions; some are constitutionally captious and sceptical; some are of profligate habits; some, again, are vain, shallow, and ready to follow the leading of others, whom they ignorantly admire; and some have the misfortune to have grown up in infidel society. Fashions, customs, and politics, infidel both in principle and tendency, form the materials of that common hot-bed, from which these all spring up with a rapid growth. To the predisposed mind, already saturated with real unbelief, it requires little more than the bare announcement that it exists, to be received as a grateful discovery. And however varied may be the accidental combinations of character and circumstances, by which this result is attained, they may be regarded but as the slight modifications of one common disease inherent in human nature,



'and having all the same infirmities of heart and intellect for their first elements.

When the 'unbeliever,' whose progress we have been tracing in the 'last letter,' arrives at that stage, in which we may assume that express and self-avowed dissent begins; it is not a *necessary* consequence that he will pursue the question further. It requires few, and these not very distinct reasons, to establish a prejudged issue; and as, for the most part, the infidel has become such, without knowing very distinctly why, so he is also mostly content to proceed in the same course. His disbelief has grown (like the religion of the multitude) out of habitual grounds, and if he is so far at peace with himself, it is all he requires. He would, if left to himself, gladly drop a question—which is always less satisfactory, in proportion to the real force of his understanding.

But in a great many, perhaps most instances of open scepticism, the question is, as I have said, to be settled with Others. There are many strong and constantly occurring temptations to the open avowal and defence of infidelity. Human pride exacts this course, from one who desires to maintain a pretension to superior intellect; and the clever sceptic will scarcely be content, until he plants his rules of conduct and opinion on the

high ground of reason. There is in the avowal of scepticism an implied reproach to be warded off; the human infirmities of his opponents, exaggerated as they are in part by hostile observation, and partly by error of principle, excite ridicule, indignation, and disgust. The zeal of good but simple persons enflames his mind by senseless, and encourages him by ineffective opposition. With this, you must allow for the effect of that factious feeling, which uniformly displays itself on every side of every question in which men can be engaged—the first principle of partizanship, and the animating spirit of political and theological disputation. It is needless to swell the enumeration.

He who shall fancy himself to have attained the facile distinction of abjuring the hopes, the fears, and the faith of the vulgar, feels that he has a character of no small dignity to maintain. He cannot long continue to tread a path, which to the feeblar portion of mankind seems to imply the boldness and freedom of a resolute mind, without feeling the temptation to astonish the timid and confound the simple: neither can he easily avoid feeling, or entirely suppress the vindictive spirit of defiance and splenetic animosity, which is sooner or later worked up even in amiable and kindly dispositions, by the sense that their tenets expose them to the

disapprobation of good men, as well as to the censure of many whom they know to be, in the worldly sense, either not better than, or so good as themselves.

From whatever cause it may arise, there is a frequent call upon the Sceptic to stand on his defence, and as well as he can to make out a case for himself. We are next therefore to trace the rise of those arguments on which he relies, and then to examine in what their force consists.

He has not very far to seek for reasons ; for, in the first instance, the causes of his unbelief will present themselves in that form. There is no one much conversant with the sceptical, who will not have experienced that there are a few trite and apparently accidental remarks, upon which, if pushed home, they appear to lay no great stress ; but which so constantly recur, as to manifest that they have some deep-seated origin in the constitution of the mind, as well as a strong effect in determining the reason. The sceptic, if hardly pressed, or if sufficiently informed, will abandon these, and go on to more specious but less effective topics. These latter we shall examine farther on ; they are properly the scepticism of the sophist : but we have now to explain how, in all ordinary cases, and when left to himself, the sceptic reasons on the prepossessions of his own mind.

What these are we have already seen; and therefore before I venture to state them in their new and more pretending character of reasons, let us first prepare the way by a few words on the general principle of this species of fallacy. This is essential to the object I have in view; to trace to their uniform principles the natural workings of infidelity. To understand that these prepossessions must naturally become the real reasons of the sceptic, you have but to reflect that this is a general principle of all reasoning. All reasoning, properly so called, must begin either with some known or admitted principle, either a fact or an assumption; so that its first condition is that something must be granted, which cannot be or needs not to be proved. To adopt and rely on such is the constitutional habit of the intellect. This *datum* may be erroneous, and it is perhaps in few instances sufficiently weighed; but it is the resting place on which the mind takes its stand, or rather the furthest point it can distinctly seize along the chain of thought; and whether real or fallacious, has only to be believed to become a sufficient support for all it can be made to bear. Thus, then, every strong prepossession may become a principle both of action and opinion, and consequently of argument. The mind

cannot, or as it may happen, will not look beyond it. And even if by some accidental occasion it should chance to be transiently dispelled, still it rarely occurs that it will not return, bearing with it all its illusive consequences. This will be the more intelligible by recollecting that these notions are mostly entertained rather in the form of vague impressions than as distinct propositions : it is thus that error is sometimes dissipated by the mere attempt to invert it with the precise forms of words. This duly weighed, will remove the difficulty of justly conceiving the disproportioned stress, which very rational persons are so constantly observed to place on notions, which to others seem wholly unauthorized.

It is a great fallacy to suppose that the errors of men begin in false reasoning ; a hundred persons can readily discern an error in the logic of an argument, for one who can justly assume a principle, or detect the error which it may contain. Few minds are so clear sighted as to extricate themselves from a fallacious prepossession, or to separate a common notion from the many essential errors which constantly vitiate their application. So far is widely applicable to all the errors of human reason, and may be illustrated from the whole range of moral sentiment, and even physical perception, as well

as from the countless errors of abstract speculation. Whatever fallacious course the mind of man pursues, you need only follow it a little way up the chain of successive inference, to discover some implicit notion, which only subsists, because it is not questioned. In the ordinary affairs of the world,—in the rail-road path of system and social interest,—there is a necessary limit to these aberrations. But the moral perception, while, like the outward sense, it is liable to the impositions of appearance ; has this characteristic difference, that it is also deceived from within ; it is under the strong influence of the corrupted will : thus the dishonest traffic of these spurious and contraband assumptions is carried on, not merely by the ignorance, but by the connivance of the authorities of Reason.

It cannot, then, be attended with any difficulty, to understand the natural and simple operation, by which the immediate causes of unbelief, which we have traced in the first of these letters, become transformed into objections of spontaneous growth ; which, though totally void of logical force, yet have a moral weight of still intenser power. While the answer is to be sought from without, these objections spring unsought from every recess of head and heart. They are not, from their character, fitted for the purpose of detailed argument,

nor will they bear even to be stated with the precision of systematic reasoning. But they are not the less adapted to the interested advocacy of human desire ; or to the confusion, the interruption, and cursory habits of conversation, with all its varied resources of colloquial chicanery.

I dwell the more on this, because there are many good and wise men, who on the first statement of such objections, will suppose them scarcely to require so much serious notice. But this is an opposite error, arising from an insufficient consideration of the actual operations of our moral nature. These objections, little as they bear the light of the distinct analysis of reason ; though the very sophist who has uttered them, may add, “to be sure it is not actually an argument”—yet they are built on the very first principles of human error and corruption, and have a fixed hold, inseparable as sin, in the heart and bosom of life. It is for this reason they should be stated and analyzed: like those shadows which darkness offers to the superstitious eye, that vanish from fixed inspection, and recur unsought; they are to be dispelled only by pouring into their dim recess, the broad and steady light of plain statement, and thorough inspection.

To effect this the easier, I will endeavour, after

I shall have specified these objections in their primary form, to lay before you the general methods and artifices by which they are maintained in conversation,—their appropriate medium—and then, humiliating as the task may appear, state and examine them, with a candor and fairness which even you will hardly think them to deserve. As this plan of proceeding will only extend to three, or at most four more letters, we may then follow the Sceptic into those sophisms which belong to a stage something more artificial and studied, and which, while they seem to have more real difficulty, are equally founded on the broad uniform principle of ignorance and error.

The first, least logical, but most commonly used and most influential of these objections, are : that revealed religion is generally disbelieved : that it is *not possible* to believe it : that it is taken without proof : that it has no proof. These primary dogmas of this, and, in principle, most other species of scepticism, are so immediately connected with the details already placed before you, that it would be difficult to expand them further, without tedious repetition. They are reasons founded on *previous impressions*, and deriving from them their whole force. A force which, nevertheless, is felt alike through all the various ranks of unbelievers, from



the formal Christian, whose unbelief is hidden from himself, to the equally self-deceiving Sophist, who attributes it to the acuteness of his understanding. The rest of scepticism, as I shall hereafter try to shew, is but one class of those many glittering and imposing superstructures of ingenious fallacy, which the ambitious and restless activity of human thought delights to rear, upon the narrow and imperfect foundations of a knowledge bounded on every side by impenetrable darkness.

The unbeliever's impression, that his unbelief is shared with the multitude, is founded on that constitution of the social state described in my first letter. Its immediate force consists not alone in the presumed expression of the common sense of the world, but also in that *sense* of a great communionship of hope or fear ; that feeling of common cause and universal sympathy, which is known, in such varied instances, to harmonize individual minds to the tone of great crowds, giving courage to cowards, and patriotism to base and sordid mobs. But in our immediate instance it is additionally efficient, from the powerful modification of dispositions and motives on which it acts : the reluctant will—the sense of difficulty—the indolent reason, the feeble and remote motive. With these strong co-operating allies, this fallacious

impression comes upon the alienated spirit of the unbeliever as a sufficient excuse ; it becomes a reason, (to which neither the experience or the tendency of his understanding affords any answer) why, though he cannot prove the actual falsehood of revealed religion, he is not obliged to examine its truth : it is *to him* unauthorized by the *ordinary* credentials of truth, and carries with it a *prima facie* presumption of fallacy. We shall hereafter distinctly analyze the grounds on which these fallacious assumptions rest.

There is in all error some stage, at which when the understanding arrives, all its future progress becomes easy. One absurd assumption facilitates others of the same kind and consequence ; and when a conclusion is arrived at, no matter by what doubtful course, the reasons by which it appears to be supported, are received with an assent less scrupulous. The conviction serves to confirm, and appears to save the necessity of a rigid scrutiny into, the proof. Such is the common course of human error, by which all things are gradually pressed into its service ; the mind treads in a vicious circle, drawing inferences falsely, or from false premises ; and confirming itself in error, by the very errors it has made. This reflection duly weighed, may lessen the difficulty of conceiving how such

apparently slight reasons come to have so much weight ; it will explain how it is, that the supposed universality of unbelief, will terminate in an inference by which this unbelief seems justified : the presumption is tacitly or expressly implied—that what no one believes cannot be true.

The very same compendious formulary, applies in the same way, to the difficulties which have been encountered, in attempting to arrive at faith by those erroneous efforts already explained—that is to say, by straining the comprehension, to obtain distinct ideas of spiritual truths. The impossibility of success in this absurd attempt, very naturally terminates in the conclusion, which the sceptic is so often heard to express, that it is not possible to believe.

Similarly, the fact, that they who profess the Christian faith, are for the most part ignorant of its proof, taken in conjunction with the above hasty inferences, serves to confirm the unbeliever in the strangely gratuitous notion *that there is no proof*. This last stretch of the credulity of error is so likely to be incredible, to those who have no experience amongst the sceptics, that it may be worth trying to give some additional explanation of it. This may be done in a few words.

Generally, the sceptic is not merely unacquaint-

ed with the evidences of scriptural truth ; but in addition to his observation of the usual ignorance of others, he very commonly, indeed mostly associates with a class of persons who are similarly affected with himself ; amongst whom it becomes customary to assume this, in common with other such assertions, as maxims favourable to their purpose. These persons, whose general object is to live at ease in their own way, and to prevent the intrusion of all disturbing thoughts, gradually fall into a system ; which, like all such systems of a *class*, is preserved with a factious spirit, that deals in exaggerations. And though these may be taken by a few, in a more modified sense, and with very considerable restrictions ; yet, as usual with such, they are adopted by the *class* in their unrestricted sense. For the sceptic, in his own way, is at least as credulous as the rest of mankind—a paradox, the truth of which, I trust, you will admit on very sufficient evidence, before we have done. But to our purpose : this important tenet, which absolves the unbeliever from all further care upon the subject, must be supported at all risks. And if there are also some serious obstacles to be encountered in the maintenance of such a point, there are, even when it becomes a matter of dispute, some specious advantages on the negative side. Some (the prin-

cipal), of these will appear, when we are considering the sceptical method of disputation, in the next letter. I will here only mention the answer, which is commonly giving to the reference to such writers as Butler and Paley. There is no question, it will be said, that does not admit of specious advocacy; and it is granted, without further trial, that they were dexterous logicians and able men; but the sceptic having his mind set at rest upon *sufficient grounds*, does not desire to puzzle himself further. There is another answer given by a much more dexterous and small class of persons: it may thus be expressed in their own language, "Oh! I thought all these writers were exploded long ago." Were I at liberty to name the particular persons from whom I have heard this audacious comment, I might add with truth, that whenever, in any matter relative to religion, morals, or politics, they appeal to general opinion, or cite "all the world" in behalf of their peculiar principles, they in fact speak of half a dozen persons, who differ from the rest of mankind, in carrying all their errors and infirmities to a more extravagant length. Of this error, in the self-defensive form in which it is sometimes upheld by a more respectable class, it may be observed; that whether we can explain it or not, such is the

fact. The unbeliever is ignorant of the evidence of Christianity, and asserts that *there is none*. When hard-pressed with the justice of trying the truth of this in the only rational way, he has but one more reply,—it is this, that he knows *there can be none*.

There are further considerations, which add their weight to these already sufficient fallacies on this point. The pious Christian, who does not require these proofs, very frequently treats them with an unjustifiable contempt. He looks, as is right, to the more advanced and practical views of Christian doctrine ; and when he comes into collision with the unbeliever, he often unconsciously betrays a cause which he would joyfully maintain at the stake. The unbeliever, who is frequently led into controversy with good men who really know no more than himself, is confirmed by many an inglorious victory in his false tenet, that the best evidenced facts within the compass of our knowledge are utterly devoid of proof.

From these more elementary errors, the unbeliever proceeds on the same course, and using the same deceptive resources, to more specious sophisms—all of which still owe their entire force to the willing mind. Like a wilful child, who struggles against some unpalatable draught, he

strives against all efforts to awaken him to a sense of truth, with motives as short-sighted, and by expedients as frivolous. If he overlooks the proof to escape the conclusion, he mistakes the *intent* in order to question the effect; he charges the Religion of God with all the errors of mankind; without knowing its real doctrines or peculiar characters, he substitutes for them, and rails against, the superstitions and heresies of human invention.

These, and other such disingenuous resources, which it will be enough to notice when we meet them presently in detail, afford a fully sufficient seeming of reason for those who are willing, without too close a scrutiny, to reject a religion which has nothing to attract and much to repel the vain, the indolent, the worldly, and the sensual. The real force of such observations, too, is much augmented by the great facility with which they can be thought of, multiplied, and communicated—requiring neither knowledge nor intellectual effort, and putting no stress on the memory or judgment. The *onus probandi* is in fact thrown on the side of Christianity, and the unbeliever thinks himself safely entrenched in peremptory negations, compendious charges, and frivolous quibbles, which he considers it fair to hold until he is forcibly dislodged. He seems to take for granted that he

cannot be responsible to the law of God, until he is satisfied of his jurisdiction : totally overlooking the momentous consideration, that he not only neglects to use, but perversely labours to abuse his own understanding upon the subject. It never seems to enter into his calculation, that if God has given his revelation to man, and addressed its evidences to his reason and moral sense rather than to his physical perceptions, we are *therefore* responsible for the use we make of our understandings.

Should you, as I strongly anticipate, feel dissatisfied with the statement of those objections, which I have assigned you—should they seem somewhat less specious, when subjected to the test of paper, than when stated in the loose and interrupted confusion of tongues, amidst which they have carried so much triumph,—and should you therefore charge me with misrepresenting the profound philosophy in which you place so much trust,—I must only say, that I state the same objections, which you have not thought insufficient in the many conversations which I have had with you for many years. I cannot, at the same time, quite concur with you, should you be induced to think so meanly of them ; for whatever may be their philosophical demerits, they are the whole



philosophy of scepticism—the strong armour with which the human heart is clothed against the actual assaults of conscience. The arguments of those who set up the boast of superior wisdom on the subject, are uniformly rejected by the practical common sense of the humbler and less ambitious unbeliever ; while, in return, the more cautious logic of learned men has rejected, or pretended to reject, these homely but efficient sophisms of the world. Between the two extremes, it might seem that the question is virtually abandoned : but the secret truth is, and I trust to set it in the clearest light—in heart all classes are nearly alike—moved by the same motives, and imposed upon by the same fallacies. The metaphysical sophist leaves his fine-woven trains of verbal ratiocination behind him in his closet, and forgetting, or not having any distinct conception of their abstract results, acts and thinks like the rest of mankind : if he did not, he might often pass for a lunatic. But we are digressing into a more advanced stage of our argument.

One great cause why these and such reasonings have so much effect, is this ; that there is, as it were, no weight in the opposite scale. The sceptic is mostly so ignorant of the proof, and even of the essential character of Christianity, that so far

as he is concerned, it is precisely as if no proof existed. He needs *no reason* for scepticism, and knows of none for belief: and further, he does not desire to know of any. Such is the total result of our discussion, so far as it has gone. If the sceptic, as often happens, is compelled to give up his argument, he does so without much reluctance; for he presumes that it is still as good as any on the other side: the abandonment of error does not necessarily lead to truth. These objections are but the outworks he has thrown up; and have, in truth, no real connection with the subject.

But you ask, in a controversy, of such duration, and so frequently renewed, in which the Sceptic is alleged to be so feebly armed with reasons; why no effective progress is made by his opponent. To answer this, shall be the immediate object of my next letter.

I am, &c.

## LETTER IV.

### ON THE POPULAR METHOD OF DEISTICAL REASONING.

The subject to which I must now call your attention—the popular method of deistical reasoning—is one which will enable me more fully to answer some questions, which you are in the habit of asking. It may, I trust, satisfy you as to the cause, why, in the numerous discussions which have taken up our time for so many years—as well as in those in which we have borne our part with others—it has happened that neither you, or any of our sceptical acquaintances, have yet been convinced of their errors. In addition, we shall have an opportunity to examine why, on such occasions, no argument of any weight in favour of Christianity is ever, or, to say the most, seldom and ineffectively introduced. And lastly, it may be the best method of illustrating and confirming the theory contained in the three preceding letters.

In those occasional discussions, there are two causes unfavourable to any decided result. One, the course taken ; the other, the method of taking it. But before I enter upon these topics, let me recal to your mind a trifling incident, in which

you were yourself an actor; it is fixed in my mind, by having afterwards occasioned between us one of those endless discussions, of which it is no bad illustration.

Two years since, in a short excursion amongst the Connemara Mountains, we happened to fall in with a poor unlettered rustic, who attended us for some hours, through the intricate passes of these hills. He shewed, on a great many common subjects, a degree of shrewdness, and homely but pointed wit, at which, for a little while, you seemed infinitely delighted. At length, I forget how it happened, you became entangled in a very serious argument. I believe that, as a philosopher, you thought proper to enlighten the poor man's mind with a lecture on Astronomy. He did not turn out to be the most docile of pupils: and I recollect that there were two of your assertions, which he met with the most masterly display of Scepticism I ever happened to witness. Of these, one was relative to the spheroidical form of the earth: the other, the fact of its motion in free space: or, as the poor man expressed it, rolling through the empty sky, without any kind of prop. This he sturdily insisted was impossible, and contrary to reason, experience, and common sense. It was an absurdity too gross for any one, out of

swaddling clothes, to digest, that even a bag of feathers, not to talk of this vast universe, should continue to roll away without any thing either to hold it up in its place, or drive it on its way. He very plainly proved, to his own evident satisfaction, that if you were right, the earth must be forever falling down into the bottomless abyss. He also argued with great shrewdness, that if it turned quite round, the same would as surely happen to its inhabitants. On both points he triumphantly referred you, every now and then, to the evidence of your senses, and hinted that learned men were often very credulous, from not looking about them on the actual goings on of the world. He observed that no one saw more of the stars, than persons like himself, who often spent his nights, as well as days, on the mountains ; and that there could be no other way of knowing these things. Another argument of his I can recollect, which perplexed you more than all : he very plainly proved, that it would be quite inconsistent with his notions of the wisdom of the Creator, to construct such a complicated piece of machinery as you described ; and, for the sake of the annual and diurnal changes, which were of very doubtful convenience, to send such a great body of land and water so many million of miles out of its way,

round the sun ; which, he added, every body knew to be nothing more than a great ball of fire, fixed up among the clouds, for no other purpose than to give light to the people, and make the grass grow. Lastly he told you, that your whole description was one of the many absurdities, invented time out of mind by learned men, to impose upon the world, which was always too wise to believe such crazy notions. You were the more nettled at this, because you supposed the poor fellow to be thinking of the Ptolemaic and other such exploded systems of philosophers and schoolmen. The poor man had probably no such meaning, though he annoyed you prodigiously by confounding the demonstrative science of Newton, with the absurd superstitions of astrology. In the whole of this most singular controversy, your ragged antagonist never let pass a single occasion for a good joke ; and when he had succeeded in raising a laugh, he evidently set it down to the disparagement of your argument. He also evinced great controversial judgment in interrupting your reasonings, at the strong point : and still more, in the felicitous audacity with which he denied the simplest axioms, when they favored your notions ; and again, with equally happy inconsistency, adopted them for his own purposes. After some time you became

heated ; and even this the shrewd old fellow turned to his purpose, not heeding the fact that he was also himself a little testy : he told you, that he perceived by your temper, that you were a collegian and an astrologer, and therefore had a personal interest in imposing on the people. I omit the provoking mixture of sophism and flippant jest, with which he similarly met your other position, as to the Earth's form. Or how he moved your indignation by flippantly observing ; that had he assisted in the formation of this world, instead of adopting for a model, that absurd and aristocratic vegetable the turnip, (your unhappy illustration,) he would have recommended for a prototype that useful and popular vegetable the potato.

At last we were both much pleased at getting rid of the old man, and I still recollect the mortified aspect with which, before he turned a corner of the village which we were entering at the moment, you looked after him, and with a forced smile of much significance, observed, how little knowledge it required to be a sceptic. To this I assented most cordially. And you proceeded very emphatically to point out the uses of philosophy, in freeing the mind from those vulgar prejudices, by which it is shackled in its reception of great truths, which lie beyond the sphere of the senses ; and

thus enabling the liberal mind to attain those remote inferences, which reason carries home to the studious. The old peasant, you were pleased to observe, instantly denied whatever he could not entirely comprehend ; and whatever threatened to disturb his prejudices. You also very forcibly remarked, that he maintained his ground chiefly by means of his own errors, and by making false statements, which it would take whole days to rectify ; lastly, you repeated twice over with an indignant air, that the fool asked questions which an angel could not answer ; alluding to his having rather sneeringly asked you, what gravitation was made of.

All the time I most fully and entirely concurred with every thing you said ; but was every moment on the point of interrupting you with one of our old college *crambes* from Horace, *de te fabula, &c.* I was not a little amused and astonished to hear you so deliberately pronounce so much keen satire on yourself.

When, also, I observed the acerbity of temper which you betrayed on this ridiculous occasion, I could not help thinking of the accusation, which is constantly on your tongue, against the advocates and teachers of Christianity ; that they shew a great want of philosophic indifference, and that



their zeal is too frequently animated by hatred and anger. But assuredly, my dear friend, if you could not keep your temper in maintaining a theory, not essentially requiring faith from the world at large, you can have no just right to ask for such indifference from the Christian vindicating that which he regards as the most sacred truth. The earth will revolve upon its diurnal round, and pursue its annual path around the sun, although the peasant should continue ignorant of its theory, or the philosopher adhere to the cycles and epicycles of those who thought themselves to be as wise in their own generation : the materialist will think, (however vainly,) though he deny himself a mind : and the sceptical pupil of Hume will continue to eat and drink, though, in consistency, he must deny himself a body. These speculations have no practical application, and demand no faith. But the essential requisition of the Christian Religion is faith. It is no driftless philosophy, but the main end of life and conduct : and rejects, as absurd and inconsistent with its leading facts and doctrines, the species of indifference you are always insisting upon. You have no right to demand that the Christian is to continue his whole life, to indulge in philosophic doubt, or treat, as an indifferent question, the subject of duty to God, and life to his own soul. You

might as well exact from one who sees his friend tottering over some unfathomable fall, to listen with tranquil toleration, to a lecture on the fall of bodies. In truth, you must allow that it requires much more coolness than belongs to ordinary men, to hear the plainest questions, on whatever the subject may be, perplexed by all the palpable evasion, mis-statement, and sophistry, which an acute understanding can collect for the purpose of opposition. And what is still more to be deprecated, you seldom yourself succeed in maintaining throughout, that stoical temper which you would exact: I have indeed seldom found that I might venture to push you too closely on this anxious topic, without having to risk the unhappy result, of witnessing the shallowness of an acute mind, and the bitterness of an amiable disposition.

In this sketch you have probably anticipated all I have to say upon the topic of sceptical disputation.

The course of argument usually adopted by the Sceptic, is entirely unconnected with the question understood to be at issue; namely, the truth of scripture. It is also such as to give him the advantage of a position impregnable to fair reason, and excluding circumstantial statement. That person must be unusually dull of intellect, and destitute of topics, who cannot, at will, invent and

multiply questions and objections, to which no satisfactory answer can be opposed ; either because they are entirely beyond the scope of human knowledge ; or because, being essentially devoid of meaning, they can have no answer.

It may be right to explain, why I do not here mean to dwell upon the use of those preliminary objections, stated in the preceding letter. They strictly fall within the class of conversational sophistry. But there is this peculiar difference attending their use ; being chiefly affirmations of fact, they do not afford that advantage which sceptical disputation requires—the facility of being dissolved into the impenetrable clouds of metaphysics. In the broken encounter of crowded meetings, where systematic opposition is impossible—where a laugh, or any other incident equally slight, can turn aside retort—these more simple and elementary forms are not only resorted to ; but as abstract disquisition is always unpleasing, and as these are both compendious in form, and adapted to the common prejudice, they are by far the most available weapons of the Sceptic. They are not, however, with one exception,\* of that description of

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\* Of these prepossessions, two relate to matter of fact, and as such can be at once met by express contradiction, they can be brought to an issue, which is not the object of the sophist. A third (that Christianity cannot be believed,) is, however, an exception, and a topic common to all classes of

artifice, by the help of which he can maintain his ground in the actual combat of disputation; and it may be enough here to name them, as amongst the varied means of dexterous evasion, by which the Sceptic frequently escapes the subject, so as at the same time to preserve a seeming speciousness. But they have a real importance, far beyond the mere sophisms of disputation; and must therefore be distinctly considered in the course of our correspondence. They are impressions of the mind, and actuating motives; and though mostly pleaded in private and confidential communications, they imply too much assumption of circumstantial proof, to be easily maintained. They savor also too much of pinning faith upon vulgar prejudice for the vanity of that person who pretends to despise it, and affects to be a sceptic from the reason of the thing. I am particular in this explanation, that you may not hastily accuse me of abandoning any part of the statement, which I have so far labored to establish.

That you may the more easily estimate the reasonableness of that course, which, in imputing to the sceptic, I am willing to appeal to your expe-

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sceptics. The fourth, (that it cannot be proved,) is exempted by the circumstance, that from the difficulty of maintaining it on its own peculiar merits, it always terminates in the former.

rience ; let me call upon you to recollect, that the only question really at issue is, whether Christianity is a religion divinely revealed, or not. State it as we may, this is the question ; and the only rational method of conducting it, is the trial of its alleged authorities. It is nothing more or less than a question of fact. To discuss its merits, on any other ground, implies many absurd assumptions. For, although it should be granted ; that there is a moral probability established by experience, by means of which we can draw inferences nearly infallible, on the designs and actions of men, or, in a word, so far as that experience fairly applies ; yet it is not true, that we have the same uniform course of inductive experience, and uniform analogy, as to the designs and acts of the Creator. And when we set aside his revelations of himself, that little becomes infinitely less. You then arrive at those vague abstractions, the value of which is stamped by the universal discord of the philosophers of ancient and modern ages : underived assumptions, upon which no two men have been able to agree, from the earliest era of recorded opinion ; and of which, respectfully be it said, the modern sceptic does not pretend to know any thing, unless when the question which he dislikes to meet fairly, is to be obscured and evaded by such means. It

cannot but be felt, too, on a little reflection, that where such proof is offered or pretended to, as is actually adapted to human reason, and to the ordinary means of investigation, that it should at least be first examined. For, if fallacious, assuredly it cannot fail to be quickly overthrown by those whose brains can penetrate beyond the sphere of human observation, into the mystery of first causes, and the councils of God. It is natural to suspect the honesty of their designs, who are seen making such an infinite and pathless circuit, to an object which stands so obviously before their eyes.

It is found a hard matter for the wisest men to estimate the designs of others ; and from the minutest observation, and most extensive comparison, to conjecture justly upon the vicissitudes of human events. Few men can correctly anticipate their own course of action and feeling in future contingency : none but a fool would presume to draw conclusions, upon an art or science of which he is entirely ignorant. The merest sciolist—the man most confessedly ignorant in every thing else, scarcely utters two sentences in the capacity of an unbeliever, before the mantle of Chrysippus and the subtlety of the schoolmen seems to have descended on his shoulders ; and he plunges, with confident ignorance, into the plans and attributes of God.

He dogmatizes on questions, which wiser men have hesitated to approach ; in order to doubt on questions, which a little common sense might decide in half an hour's rightly aimed study. On these occasions, he assumes precisely the position of one, who should refuse to take the trouble of opening his eyes, until the possibility of seeing should be proved by a demonstration *a priori*. If he is told that such is the fact, and that it may be easily proved, he will first insist on its being thoroughly explained, its moral fitness and its expediency shewn, with its essential consistency with the character, plans, and laws of God. How aptly does such a course illustrate the moral constitution of a self-deceiving nature, which half unconsciously attaches impossible conditions to an unwilling concession to truth. The first and greatest difficulty of convincing the sceptic, is owing to the fact, that he is not sincere in his reasoning. Still less does he enter upon the subject with the intention to be fair, or with any idea of its real importance. He is content to fight it off *quocunque modo*.

I have said, that in all these reasonings, the Sceptic assumes the falsehood of Christianity. Of this, the particular objections to be examined will afford some curious examples. But I will now offer you some proof, that this species of sophism is

*essentially involved* in those deistical disputations. It is no more than a truism to say, that no subject can be rightly understood, or justly concluded upon, unless by a full and sufficient statement of its *real conditions*. Should there exist any relation between the spiritual world, or any future state, and our present existence, there is in consequence the highest degree of moral probability, that our present state, moral constitution, and entire law of being must be modified in reference to it. That, for instance, the intent and plan of the Creator must be a principle anterior to any temporal expediency or law—that the object, whatever it may be, of the future state, must contain the true solution to all questions, in which it can by possibility be concerned. Now if this be a just assumption, and I do not think you can object to it, it is evident that any system of moral rules, or conventional opinions, or laws of mind, not directly deducible from these antecedent principles, can only be admissible upon the assumption, that they have no existence. This I hold to be demonstratively true. That you may not, however, accuse me of assailing you with mere abstractions, I must endeavour to give you some specific application of this rule. Any estimate of human virtue must fall infinitely short of the truth, if we omit the



idea of duty to God ; unless upon the assumption, that there is none due. If we omit the facts of the brevity and uncertainty of this present state, and the certainty and eternity of the future, our estimate of worldly prudence must be infinitely above the truth ; unless on the assumption, that there is to be no future state. Admit these ; and the wisdom of this world, occupied in short-sighted speculations, which extend beyond death and are dispersed before it ; and human virtue, negligent of the first great law of God,\* and employed in minor amiabilities and duties ; assume the opposite characters of sinfulness, defying God, and folly, cheating ourselves. Those questions, then, of moral obligation, of prudential necessity, of fitness, divine justice, human virtue, &c. &c. and all the specious generalities in which you love to shroud your ignorance, and take refuge from a plain question,—all these are assumptions of the conclusion ; and implicitly, if not expressly dependent on the very facts, which they are designed for the purpose of assailing. Your first principles are thus included in the very errors you commit. Religion, in truth, must necessarily contain the principle of all such questions as involve the duty of man—his

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\* Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and all thy strength. “ *This is the first commandment.*” Mark xii. 30.

true interest, as well as all questions relative to the nature, wisdom, or justice of God. You must, to be conclusive, begin by denying this great first principle: and your denial must be maintained upon some remote abstraction, which cannot, by any possibility, involve your conclusion. But then, this abstraction must first be found, and substantiated to reason. It must be made as certain to the mind, as the definitions of Euclid—but without that arbitrary character, which is the pledge of their certainty. Your abstraction must be simple, and uncomplicated with assumptions of any kind—a necessary truth, shewn to exist independent of this known world and its conventions. When you shall have made this great and unprecedented metaphysical discovery, you may, if it will serve the purpose, *demonstrate* the falsehood of the Christian Religion. But to attempt this, by means of *your* ideas of God, abstract right, justice, expediency, human sentiment, or any such abstraction; is not merely to assume a principle, of which you have no accurate notion, but one which is absolutely involved in the very remotest possibility of such a great first cause as God, such a first principle as his will—such a first law as religion. The natural progress of the mind is in this, as in your favourite astronomy, from Heaven to Earth: from the mere un-

aided sense you can derive a circumscribed knowledge of this narrow scene of human existence : but its relative position among the spheres, its magnitude, motion, form, and orbit, and all the useful facts connected with these, are the result of an apparently remote and more difficult knowledge of the paths, periods, bulks, and distances of other bodies, of which our natural powers of observation can afford either faint intimations or none.

To this disadvantage, of having the question placed on such self-involving assumptions, may be added that common and often noticed cause of fallacy, which so favours and increases the deception of this method of reasoning. I mean the fact, that such assumptions are so liable to be concealed in the language we use. A theory lies hid in the application of a word ; and thus, in the excitement and confusion of oral disputation, advantages are gained by the accident of language ; while neither party engaged, is clearly conscious of the precise point where the advantage or difficulty lies. Hence the plausibility of the sceptic : his sophism is hidden, or divided into the vague ramifications of an inaccurate phraseology. His great weapon is the inaccurate use of language ; which, when most accurately used, is to be received with the utmost distrust : and it must be observed of this en-

tire department of human language, that it is inseparably interwoven with error. There are few metaphysical terms undepraved by the very reasoners who have sanctioned them ; involving, in almost every instance, either the notion of an individual, or the convention of a school. To lean on such frail supports is vain ; and this rule must be, and is observed, by every sober understanding, that (beyond the limits of the stricter sciences)\* no argument can be conclusive, the premises of which are not facts, experimentally ascertained. This rule, which, if generally adopted, would overturn the theoretical pretensions of numberless philosophers on every side of this controversy, must radically destroy the metaphysical pretensions of the sceptical disputant ; whose principles are derived from beyond that limit within which language *can* have distinct meaning. In this important principle, will be found, the most marked distinction between the two great classes of reasoners, to which, for example, I would severally refer Locke and Hume. The verbal fallacy, into which each may have fallen, is of widely different consequence. One class reasons upon a word ; the other upon the notion derived from observation and con-

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\* Mathematics, law, &c. in which the first principles are conventional assumptions, and not dependent on the essential constitution of things.

sciousness. Any error contained in the former, vitiates the whole chain, because the word is its principle ; But, the ill-selected word, though it may obscure, cannot vitiate an argument which does not depend on it. The careful reader, by the exertion of his common sense, will soon correct, or, from a just apprehension of the thought, omit to notice the inaccuracy of a word. But the abstractions of which we speak, admit of no such distinction. You may define and name the attributes of God ; but you must rank high in the scale of visionary dreamers, if you think that you can attach any definite idea to your names. Here the word is necessarily the principle ; and error is the necessary consequence.

This reasoning, of course, equally applies to those frequent deistical *questions*, which require explanations on the same impossible conditions. The sceptic occasionally, and but occasionally, lays aside the weapon of the dogmatist, and becomes modestly inquisitive : he humbly begs to know the secret of God's councils—the design, expedience, and just policy of all things, incomprehensible to the rest of mankind. Overlooking the universal mystery which overspreads creation, and conceals (farther than is *written*) the first cause of all things and the final of most ; he presumptuously lifts up

the feeble lamp-light of his small intellect, towards the dim and boundless infinity ; and mistakes that little glimmering haze which surrounds himself, to the exclusion of brighter and remoter lights, for the boundary of existence. But, such is the infirmity of our reason and will—it is felt to be easier for the sceptical mind to lose its way, in those “wandering mazes” which have no end—in which unmeaning words and unintelligible generalities, while they mislead, conceal his error and perplex his opponent ; than to weigh the precise force of a combination of moral and historical facts. It is found less laborious, too, to settle the law of abstract justice, virtue, benevolence, than effectually to apply a little moral discipline to that most intractable of subjects—self.

Such perplexed and shallow arguments as are to be met in sceptical *authors*, upon the light of nature—natural right—abstract virtue or justice—obligation—cause, and effect—and other such speciously sounding nonsense—the tricks of verbal art, and the charlatanery of philosophic pretenders : these have the comparative virtue of being tangible to the exposing touch of honest reason. And though, for the reasons already stated, it is not easy to cast any sure light upon the subjects to which they relate, it is yet most easy to overturn

their reasonings, and shew that they resolve no question, and shake no important evidence. But when we meet in the confused and heady conflicts of the tongue, and have to unravel the entanglement of the loosest and most arbitrary metaphysics, governed by no method or presiding art; how sadly aggravated becomes the Christian's warfare. On these most vexatious occasions, all the manly candor, the practical common sense, useful knowledge, and moderately sound logic, which seldom fail you on ordinary occasions, seem totally to desert you. Your principles, fixed on subjects of commercial and social avocation and intercourse, when brought to bear against your Scepticism, are unhesitatingly abandoned. On this one topic, there is no evasion too frivolous, no sophism too gross, no jest too coarse, to be resorted to, to escape that conclusion at which you so much desire to arrive fairly.

And thus it ever is: that extreme unwillingness to be convinced of error, or to yield fostered opinion to the arguments of an opponent—which manifests itself on all occasions—is in this, where it should least exist, the most of all alive. The most virtuous and amiable Sceptic, is on this subject mostly uncandid: but the smart, vain Deist, with his small but shrewd mind; (a frequent combina-

tion ;) who will parade his deism, as he would display a ring, is always on the alert for this shuffling and shifting game of words. To him, with especial force, Lord Bacon's profound aphorism applies, "There be who can pack the cards, but not play the game." Such a person is always ready to talk of sound philosophy, and chop unsound logic, with those who cannot pretend to retort in the war of words. With the learned, or the practised and expert reasoner, who is armed with the weapons of controversy, he will double like a hunted hare, to avoid being pinned down to facts, and the severe distinctions of right reason. On these occasions, he escapes into generalities ; and when hunted from these, to railing, profane jests, and blasphemous allusions : he laughs, or gets angry, as his temperament or the occasion urges. He reiterates all the scandal against churchmen, which popular injustice has ever invented : he fastens, with a random tongue, on sects, heresies, and superstitions of all sorts. Objections ten times refuted, and discharged from the humblest page of current authority, still find a posthumous echo in his indiscriminating tongue. Thus, between sounding abstractions which have no meaning, and slippery statements, which have a false or irrelevant meaning ; between jests which pass for argu-



ments, and arguments which, translated into precise language, might pass for very lame jests ; the disputatious sceptic contrives to make an hour's talk pass away, without suffering his scepticism to be materially affected.

These discussions require, on the sceptic's part, no exact knowledge, or precise reasoning. Objections are easy—answers difficult. This is in all cases true, every question must be easier than its solution : the one implies ignorance, the other knowledge : the child can ask, what human philosophy cannot answer. On any subject, the omission of the least important condition, must lead to a conclusion so far (at least) differing from the truth. So that it is not hard to comprehend, that ignorance itself may become no contemptible resource : it is the whole armour of scepticism. Opposed to this impregnable buttress, all knowledge is in vain, and the furthest reach of the most comprehensive reason, cannot be brought to bear upon its unsteady mark. Facts cannot be fully stated ; or authorities collated and sifted. A single flip-pant sentence may involve so much complicated error—of fact, application, and principle,—that no ordinary time, patience, knowledge and skill, can avail, where so much is to be rejected, set to rights, and disentangled.

I would not, however, be understood to imply, that the sceptic is exclusively absurd and erroneous : his good feeling and common sense are, on the other hand, constantly asserting themselves. And when not pressed by the vanity or heat of disputation, he is ready enough to abandon absurdities, which no sophistry can *fairly* maintain. But even on these occasions, nothing is really gained : the dispelling of error does not, of necessity, amount to the establishment of truth. The question in dispute, having in reality no connection with Christianity, he still retains the field, secure within the cloud of wilful evasions and misconceptions, which conceal the true question at every point.

The actual question, if occasionally stated with some fairness, can never be pursued far enough for any purpose. The Sceptic will not suffer it to go further than the first quibble he can effect. He always escapes by a side wind. Some small fact, not essential to the argument, will, on those occasions, be seized upon, and made the turning-point for much frivolous discussion ; during which the time passes, and the question is dropped. It never occurs to his mind, how infinitely minute the link he assails, and how immense and manifold the chain of moral and historical fact it appertains to.

A curious evidence of the wilfulness of scepticism, and of the little fairness of its disputant, is the constant recurrence of the Sceptic to the objections which he is compelled to give up. After frankly admitting that some notion, which he has failed to support, is untenable, he will invariably advance it in the very next company he shall chance to meet—a notorious fact, for which I must now be content to appeal to the conscious recollection, or fair observation, of every one who is conversant with society. Such is the spirit which pervades Scepticism, through all its operations, and through all its ranks.

But I am forced to conclude. Your objections are all, in some shape, to the reasonableness of Christianity; and implicitly amount to what you often assert—that, however proved, it cannot be true. Your arguments are of that class, which is technically called *a priori* by the logicians. And you constantly affirm, with much seeming earnestness, that when you shall chance to hear these things fully and fairly answered, you will then seriously investigate the evidences of the fact. Before then, my friend, this question is likely to be cleared up, so far as you are concerned, by a fuller and less ambiguous light than belongs to human reason; and you will have discovered, what you shall have

gained by the abuse of a strong understanding, and the wilful perversion of truth. These objections have often received such answers, as are enough for any unbiassed mind ; and of the greater part of them, it may be justly said, that they are capable of no answer, and require none ; for they are not within the province of either fact or reason, and can only deceive those who seek to be deceived. Were you to live at housand years in metaphysical disquisition, and in awaiting proofs, for which it is your duty to seek, you would, in the end, find yourself where you began, a Sceptic, ignorant of the subject, and doubtful even of your doubts ; destitute of the consolations of faith, and not compensated by any reasonable assurance of your unbelief. In that awful hour, which so often dispels the illusions of prejudice and voluntary perverseness—when conscience awakes reflection, by the nearness and startling loudness of its call—and the heart finds itself, at last, unarmed and alone with its accuser—how dreadful it must be, in that critical moment, to feel that you can lay hold of no reasonable hope ; and that you never once, during all the years of a wasted existence, fairly tried the question on which you have staked so much. For a few years more, you may continue to deceive yourself with human inventions—the superstitions

of the Sceptic—as little satisfactory to reason, and not so well established in fact, as the mysteries against which you are so inveterate.

But it is the nature of self-delusion, that it may not abide the test of being seen from an opposite point of view : truth alone, independent of the will, can be seen the same on every side, exhibiting the same steady aspect, and maintainable by the same reasons. If *then* sufficiently conscious of your fearful situation, you will on your death-bed recollect—for such is the tendency of fear—that you have never yet made out a distinct case against the Christian religion ; and that the book, which, after eighteen centuries of quibbling and mis-stating has not yet been disproved, may after all be truth. As the distempered illusions of desire, pride, indolence, and human convention melt away from your thoughts, you will then be powerfully struck by its high degree of *self-evidence*—fully sufficient to carry conviction to any unbiassed mind. It will perhaps occur to you, with what enthusiastic zeal you have seized upon, and given up your assent to different philosophical theories, upon less grounds. Nor will it then be a light consideration : that the natural unbelief of the crowd, founded upon the errors and infirmities of man's nature ; is counterbalanced by the more

deliberate sanction of the learning and study, the sober understanding of every age. All these thoughts are not merely likely to occur ; their occurrence is not much less certain than that of the power of reflection, and the consciousness of situation. All minds become nearly the same as they converge to that fearful pass of our existence ; the narrowed range presents a similar outline to every eye. There are exceptions, but they are anomalous : the torpor of unconsciousness or anguish ; the terror of doubt ; or the triumph of faith—these are the categories to which the death-bed scene may be reduced. Human vanity has in some rare cases succeeded in maintaining its position, and mastering, not dispelling, the terror of that hour. But the calmness which it pretends to wear, is either due to those physical causes which for the moment reduce man to the level of the brute ; or it is such as may be observed upon the scaffold, when the crowd is imposed upon by a convulsive smile, or a jest, the very levity of which betrays the effort with which it is made.

But you will here insist that I do not treat you quite fairly, that such considerations should more properly follow than precede the fulfilment of my pledge ; which, I must admit, it is now high time to redeem.

I remain, &c.

## LETTER V.

### SUMMARY VIEW.

Having now completed one stage of our proposed enquiry, it may be worth while, before we proceed, to take a brief note of the progress we have made.

Our argument commences with the statement of three facts, which I humbly presume to be undeniable; and sufficiently within the compass of observation for any one, who has paid the most common degree of attention, to what is every day passing before his eyes, and within his mind. First, that man is unwilling to believe the *Christian* religion, notwithstanding some instinctive tendencies, of a contrary kind, which, for the most part, terminate in some species of corruption of religion, or compromise between opposing dispositions. It is then shewn, that this unwillingness is favored by the constitution of his intellect; which is so modified as to rely on habits of action and thought rather than upon reasoning, in its reception of such knowledge, as it is *ordinarily* conversant with: and that, *therefore*, where this habitual method cannot be applied; the assent of

the understanding is not the same either in kind or degree. To this is added, what needs neither proof nor demonstration, the unspiritual character of the general aspect, institutions, and movements of the social system. To this last I might have added, the general tone of its literature, morals, and philosophy ; but for the reluctance I feel, to add a superfluous line to an argument, which I desire to have weighed with your most serious and candid attention.\*

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\* Upon these points there is little to be used. They must spontaneously occur, when attention has been fairly bestowed upon that general truth, of which they are but amongst the consequences. Yet it must be felt to afford a striking confirmation of the truth of the view taken, both of the nature of speculative assent, and of the practical unbelief of man, whether individually or collectively viewed ; that even the sincere believer (such, for instance, as Johnson) will, in his moral writings, exhibit a constant unconsciousness of that which, if true, is the great first principle of moral truth. Were we not acquainted with the true source of these wide aberrations, it would be a difficult problem, to explain the immense waste of labour and talent, which has been at all times employed in investigating the foundations of morality, and building unstable systems—small mock jurisdictions, in the very front of the acknowledged statutes of God. To the same class may be summarily referred, the numberless volumes of amiable morality, written by professing Christians, and eloquent in the inculcation of the duties of life on the grounds of prudence, pride, and good feeling, but with a fastidious exclusion of the great superseding motives, and an entire unconsciousness of the great final end of human life, and of the paramount obligations of man.

As for the morals of society, they are founded on human affections, modified by Christianity : not by its spiritual influences, but by its application as a part of education. Christianity is, strange to say, the received system of practical philosophy ; but this is quite distinct from its reception as a spiritual truth. Thus received, it is interwoven with a system of opinion founded on expedience and the natural affections ; to which its general influences are attributed, and into which it becomes merged by the indiscriminating prejudices of mankind.



From these great first elements, the rise and progress of scepticism is not merely probable, but a matter of course—a conclusion following, according to the strictest reasoning, from its premises. Accordingly, in the second letter, I have rather described and illustrated the progress of these operations, by which this effect is produced, than entered into any formal proof, to establish that such is the fact. From the coexistence of practical unbelief, with partial or imperfect assent, arises a frequent state of mental conflict, which is shewn to have an accelerating tendency to *self-avowed* unbelief; in which it must therefore sometimes be expected to end. It is then shown, how spurious forms of religion are still more frequently the result of this course. It is also a fact, but one not strictly within the scope of this discussion, that spurious forms of Christianity have, in themselves, a tendency to Deism. Some of them being virtually such : and all—by the counteraction they offer

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The errors of Philosophy, I am here unwilling to touch. The subject is too extensive, and the charges to be made too general, for the slight notice I can afford it here.

The natural infidelity of man is so interwoven with the whole texture of his existence, so interfused with life, that to trace it through all its forms, would be to write not a letter, but a library ; it would be to penetrate delusion in all its obscure and manifold mazes, and to unravel nearly all the fine and subtle tissues of Philosophy. But a few obvious and undeniable facts are sufficient for our immediate purpose ; and it is my anxious study to limit myself to these.

to the pure and spiritual religion of the Scripture, when unadulterated by human wisdom—tend to foster that natural unbelief, which can only be effectually combated by the “sword of the Spirit,” which is the Word of God.

In the third letter, the unbeliever is traced into some of those many varied positions, in which he is impelled to stand on his defence, and endeavour to give reasons for his unbelief: and it is there attempted to be proved, that the main causes of his unbelief will naturally assume the form of reasons for its justification. With this argument you will think me to have taken more pains than the difficulty of the thing required. In truth I could not even state, much less analyze at length, some of these slippery sophisms, which are always confronting the eye of reason, and melting into air from its fixed grasp, without feeling the strong impulse, to excuse the seemingly frivolous labor, by shewing that it is not without its use. I have stated these prepossessions briefly; as I design to give each of them a separate notice, which is to constitute the second stage of our discussion. They are: that the Christian religion is not believed by mankind; that it cannot be believed; that, so far as any class may be said to assent to

it, it is received without proof; and lastly, that it has no proof.

Finally, the popular arts of disputation on this subject are stated, as the best illustration the previous view could receive; being, in fact, the only view of these operations that is offered to the observation—save what may be found by any one, who will take the trouble to reflect diligently on what passes in the recess of consciousness, and with candid recollection survey the moral history of his own mind.

I remain, &c.

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END OF PART THE FIRST.

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# PHILOSOPHY OF UNBELIEF.

## PART II.

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### Primary Objections.

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#### LETTER I.

##### ON THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

We now come to the detailed examination of those objections, which I have denominated primary, as having their immediate source in the natural constitution of the mind, and being, therefore, independent of the inventions of sophistry, and, to a great extent, common to all minds. Wearing the several forms—of impediments to faith, or difficulties to reason—or popular objections to revealed religion—in the several stages through which the unbeliever may be assumed to pass, in the regular course, from belief to unbelief.

These objections I have, for the convenience of method, arranged under four heads : that no one believes ; that it is impossible to believe ; that

there is no proof of revealed religion ; and lastly, that there can be none. These, as you will presently perceive, embrace a great variety of distinct topics, all of which it shall be our object to refer, as nearly as we may, to the general principles of the error they severally contain.

The first of these includes two distinct topics, which we shall discuss in this and the next letter. First, that professed believers of the Gospel shew their insincerity by their conduct : and secondly, that several eminent persons of great authority and high intellectual powers, have expressly declared in their writings against it. From both of these the following inference is implied—that so strong a presumption exists against that which is thus opposed to the mass of human intellect, that no sober man can feel himself bound to waste his thoughts in searching into its probability. Now I deny the truth of your premises : and, supposing them true, the legitimacy of your conclusion.

To begin with the religion of the Christian community :—that among the great majority of professing christians, the *natural tendency* of man to unbelief is to be discovered, I am not desirous to conceal : this is the natural disposition of man, and the spirit also of the world in which he lives. The fact of its existence is a main part of the first prin-

ciple of christian doctrine, against which its non-existence would be the most fatal argument. To strive against such a disposition is the chief part of the Christian's warfare in this mortal state; to subdue it, the work of God alone. It is the infirmity, not the strength, of the human mind.

In stating this objection, you are in the habit of dwelling with much force upon the facts and awful sanctions of revealed religion, and inferring the effect which the knowledge of such things should have upon the conduct and feelings. In this there is a complication of errors—first, as to the kind of knowledge which human beings are capable of possessing, of the ultimate ends of religion; secondly, the effect of a state of mind of which you have no experience; thirdly, a mistake as to the actual nature of the conduct required; and fourthly, an unfair evasion of facts which *directly* overthrow your proposition.

Upon these points I have left myself little to say. Any one who has read the former part of these letters, must have anticipated all that is to be offered on this division of the subject. The common inconsistencies of the conduct of the larger portion of nominal Christians are fully accounted for in the first letter, and may at once be ascribed to the causes there traced out, viz., the

opposition of natural propensities and social habits ; the indistinct and shadowy impressions of spiritual objects ; and the reactive influence of the social system upon the individual.

Upon this head it will therefore be only necessary, to add a few general reflections upon the more immediate application of these great principles to a class of persons, whom you are pleased to denominate religious, for the purpose of attacking religion.

In the first place, let me remind you, that these great facts of which you would make so much— heaven, hell, death, &c., are not in reality the immediate objects present to the christian's mind. Of such objects of thought, the apprehension is necessarily too indistinct, to produce the kind of impression on the feelings, which your objection assumes. Men do not in general very much desire or fear that of which no conception can be formed out of the ordinary materials of thought. It has been fully, and I trust satisfactorily shewn, that knowledge alone, or belief alone, cannot govern the conduct without the help of some actuating influence. Either some present perception, or awakened passion, or animating sentiment, must in some way give efficacy to the conviction of reason, before it can be effective to control self-

love, pride, indolence, sensuality, and break all the natural and habitual links which form the chain of our sins. The terrors of futurity cannot be more urgent to our natural instincts, than the fear of death; or its hopes so attractive to our passions, as the goods of this life: yet we fear not death, till it stares us in the face—we are ready enough to sacrifice our future prospects in the world for the desire of the moment. Such is man—inconsistent—whether the Gospel be true or false. If it be true, a sinner—if false, an unanswerable enigma. Lost indeed, if the best effort of the highest intellect be all he has to depend upon for light.

But here you turn upon me and say that you admit all this, but still feel your objection to be rather evaded than answered. You are willing to relinquish any inference you may be supposed to have drawn from the conduct of a crowd of professing believers, who, though inconsistent, may yet be honest. But you say, that the christian faith must either be a wholly inoperative, and therefore inefficacious principle, or there must be some existing indication of its effect upon the sincere believer's disposition. Somewhere at least, you must look for consistent and decided conduct; even allowing for a reasonable interest in the affairs of this life, yet you cannot conceive how a very keen



and earnest man of the world can be a follower of Christ. I answer ; Very true,—but deny the existence of such a contradiction. I will not here waste time in pointing out the varied errors, and sources of error, which belong to the Sceptic's attempts to estimate the consistency of a believer, with the first principle of whose character, as such, he is unacquainted. The difficulty of fairly appreciating the motives of conduct, in all the varied cases in which duty and self-interest must urge to a certain extent the same path of conduct, must here be immensely aggravated.

The most satisfactory method of viewing the subject, will present itself from the consideration of the *actual character* of the Christian's motives and influences. He is neither governed by opinions and inferences, nor by motives merely prudential, but by a certain state of mind, the source of which we are not immediately concerned with. It would be sufficient for my purpose to state it as a merely moral principle, but as such language might tend to mislead, it may be right, once for all, to make a brief digression for the purpose of guarding against an important error.

The Christian, as such, is not to be viewed as one whose conduct is governed by prudential motives—squaring his actions by certain principles,

for the purpose of gaining certain advantages, or avoiding certain evils. Neither are we to consider him as actuated by certain definite hopes or terrors, unless within a very limited extent, and that altogether insufficient for any important object. The Christian is actuated by an influence working on the affections, so as to direct them to God, and from this, Christian morality becomes a necessary, but still a secondary consequence; and in this point consists a great part of the Sceptic's error—the ignorance or overlooking of the main object, which is not the perfecting of the social system, but the converting of the rebellious soul to God. As the morality of civilized nations is drawn from Scripture, the *morals* of the Christian and of the Sceptic, must, so far as social duties are in question, bear little difference to external observation. So far the real difference consists in the motive and the source. Pride may originate, from its contaminated source, the virtues of Christian truth; and mutual dependance, as well as fear, beget charitable actions and deportment. This is in fact what is meant by saying in the language of our Church, that “Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of the Spirit” “have the nature of sin.” God, as even your philosophy might infer, looks to the mind, and to his own

ends : not the ever varying order of this world of perishable mortality ; but that vast spiritual kingdom, to the completion of which, all things are designed to be subordinate.

The awakening and converting influences of divine grace, to which Christian doctrine teaches its believer to look for light and strength, can only be traced by human apprehension, in its effects, or proved from that sacred authority which the sceptic rejects. These effects are upon the natural elements of the mind, with the ordinary operations of which, therefore, they may be easily confounded. It is quite intelligible, that the power of God, acting on the mind according to its constitution, should produce effects externally traceable to the moral analogy of man's nature, as well as, in reality conformable to its main characters. Thus—instead of sudden piety kindled like a beam of original light, amid the dark illusions of human unbelief—the reason may be itself directed—the conviction slowly impressed—the heart gradually brought to its proper object, and a state of feeling gradually acquired in the use of ordinary means, in which religious sentiment becomes a present, habitual, and governing motive. The same to human consciousness, whether we suppose it caused by continued study and religious meditation and watchfulness ;

or whether we suppose that Almighty Spirit, which, though unseen, moves over the disordered elements of life, to have assisted, prevented, enlightened, animated, and gradually changed the whole character. Whether the unassisted mind can rightly pray, or feel the power of sacred truth, is needless to our argument to consider. But it is quite obvious, that such effect must be still in strict accordance with the general constitution of the mind. Whatever language I may use therefore, so far as such a distinction is concerned, you will observe that this question is in no way involved.

But to come back to the line of our discussion—we cannot more justly view the Christian character, than by considering it liable to that slow and varying progress, and all those degrees of attainment, and vicissitudes of feeling, which we observe to be man's common character in all things. Thus we shall obtain a correct view of the Christian community.

First, there may be supposed an assent of habit or reason, so as to produce a slight modification of character; acting *as* a moral motive, and ruling in favour of virtue, in cases which present no strong temptation against it. Some persons are much less viciously disposed than others; should such be possessed by a belief in Christianity, there is a strong probability that it will enter more largely

into their views and motives, and give a more decidedly religious turn to their conversation and habits: without still amounting to any thing more than a moral principle, or very seriously affecting their conduct, when strongly moved by opposing impulses. We may even go so far as to suppose, habitual conduct and contemplation to have brought home religious conviction to the mind, so as to counterbalance, to a certain extent, the strivings of evil tendency. But *still*, we shall have reached no further than, under favourable circumstances, the moral elements of our nature may be supposed to ascend independently of faith.

According to what principle then are we to estimate the Christian? I reply, by one which it never enters the Sceptic's mind to apply. Not, by any indication of ideas, which are beyond the scope of human sense or conception—about those things “which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive;” but by reliance on the revealed means of his salvation. Not by the stoical pretence of triumphing over the evil elements of his nature, but the humbling consciousness of their awful magnitude; not reliance on his own virtue, but fear of himself, and trust in God's promises, in the power of the spirit, and the sin-atoning sacrifice of his Redeemer.

But you ask, will he still be capable of wicked-

ness, and worldliness? I reply, he will be but according to the strength he receives. It is the office of divine grace to impart good counsels and holy desires; to convince the heart of sin; to awaken faith, dependence on the Redeemer, self distrust, humility, thankfulness, love, and charity in all its comprehensive sense as described by St. Paul (Cor. xiii.) But the elements of human nature still remain. The Christian is yet subject to temptation, and of course liable both to error and sin. His conversion to God is not instantaneous, but gradual; and often slow, and marked by the peculiarities of natural character. It is so ordered, that before his faith is made perfect it is liable to be schooled by many trials, which form the condition of that state in which he has been not undesignedly placed. Thus then he may from time to time appear slack in his spiritual progress, and to some extent conformed to the world. The strife between the spirit and the flesh must begin, and be more or less apparent; but the result is a change of heart, which advances with an accelerated progress. The beginning of this progress may exhibit to human eyes a doubtful character—one not freed from the bondage of the world, though aiming at something beyond it. But from this warfare his character will surely emerge into one of less questionable sanctity. Such a progress, and such a

modification of character, are both indicated in the inspired writings, and exemplified in the lives of many virtuous and spiritual Christians; in whom the moral elements of our nature are cleansed, enlightened, and restored by the continued operation of the spirit of God.

But here arises an opposite cavil. Having, by a false view of human nature, demanded superhuman devotion from the prudential Christianity of the mere believer, you next impeach the spiritual Christian for the very conduct you have insisted upon. You first affirm that the facts of Christianity, if true, are so momentous as to leave all earthly considerations unworthy of notice, and infer that no one can be sincere unless his life exhibits this persuasion. Should however an instance be found in which your conditions are actually fulfilled, you change your ground, and accuse the Christian of insanity or enthusiasm. If revelation stands upon undeniable proof, the charge may well be retorted.

If the Gospel be a truth, the charge of enthusiasm, as here applied, must be nonsense. You do not call the person *enthusiast*, in any discreditable sense, who devotes his whole mind to the improvement of his estate, or the increase of his fortune. When you apply such a term to the devout Christian, you evidently *assume the fallacy* of his faith. Such is the circle of the sceptic's mind,—he proves the Christian a deceiver, because his life does not

exhibit the conditions of sincerity; and an enthusiast, because it does. From the first he infers the falsehood of his creed, and takes it for granted in the second. The Gospel is a fallacy, because the Christian does not sincerely believe in it; and his belief proves nothing, because the Gospel is a fallacy.

Such is the inconsistency attendant upon the denial of the truth. It can only be opposed by either fallacious reasoning or false assumptions, and Scepticism offers the most consummate instances of both. Not content with setting up a false measure of belief; you also advance a gratuitous standard of action. You devise certain conceptions of objects and consequences—heaven and hell, judgment and eternity—and presume that these must be the actual objects before the Christian's mind; and demand evidences of the hope and desire, the awe or terror, which should attend the actual perception of such stupendous objects. Such is the rational construction of your frequent assertion of what your conduct would be, if you held their faith.

I freely grant you, that no mortal man attains to a way of living, or even of thinking, which can be said to bear any just proportion to the real objects of revealed religion. But why?—these objects cannot be appreciated by mere intellect—they are



entirely beyond its scope. This then *cannot be* the true standard. So long as you look to *no further means* than human faculties, man cannot put on a higher nature than he has, or entertain motives beyond the law of his mind. But if, on the other hand, you look to further means, you then have to consider the subject of your objection, according to a very different law. The question should thus become; what, according to the intent of God, as revealed in his word, should be the extent and operation of these means.

Thus, the error of the Sceptic arises from the fact, that he talks of Christians without taking Christianity into account, and by a theory of his own invention. It never occurs to his notice, that the facts upon which he founds objections, are, so far as they have any truth, foremost among the moral evidences of the truth of the Scripture. Christ died to redeem those who otherwise were lost—the spirit is sent to enlighten those who by nature are dark, and sustain those who by nature have no strength. The almighty and merciful, but just Judge, acquits him for no merit, but as the follower of Jesus. Conformable with this is all we see of life. Moral imperfection, inconsistent religion, and still more inconsistent scepticism, are the visible phenomena of the moral world.

The temporizing Christian—the fool who denies God—the worldly wise who forgets him—the profligate who violates his laws—and the deist who rejects them : all are but discordant elements of a disordered moral system—of a system of being, which, if like other systems, it was designed for any purpose, is obviously diverted from it.

In truth the very inconsistency of the objections with which we have just been employed, is but an instance of the general inconsistency of all Scepticism, and an indication of its real connection with the infirmity of corrupted will. It appears in some shape throughout the history of mind, and chiefly with regard to religion. The sophism just discussed is distinctly charged by our Saviour, upon those who personally denied him, “ For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and ye say he hath a devil. The Son of Man is come eating and drinking, and ye say, behold a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.”

By what rule then, you will repeat, are you to distinguish the true Believer from the Pretender? Considering the extensive signification of the term as *here implied*, I answer, you are not required to judge others—God will judge you by yourself, and not by others. For the Christian there is an

answer, *Gal.* v. 6, and in the same chapter, v. 23, 24, 25. To the Infidel I will conclude with the answer given by our Lord to a very similar question, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life, &c."

I remain, &c.

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NOTE.—The worldly standard of moral virtue is a theory applied by the infidel to the Christian, in its abstract strictness; but mostly relaxed for the purposes of use. Every profession and almost every situation has its moral code, varied by the expediency of the occasion. The ultimate principles of this elastic system are, it may be admitted, Christian precept, the social affections, and social expediency. And it may also be granted, that from these principles, a system of morals may be inferred, leading to the same *worldly results* as the system of the gospel. But such abstractions hold no place in life. The difference is this: the philosophic moralist professes perfection, and manifests the impossibility of its attainment. The Christian neither professes nor relies upon moral perfection; but manifests the power of grace, by the approaches he makes to it. But this approach is remarkable for being made in the direction opposite to that of the philosopher—the one being pride, the other humility—the one a vain self-reliance, the other self denial. Again, the one acts with reference to human approbation, or worldly ends, the other with a view to the service of God.

Such are some of the causes why the sceptic is not qualified to sit in judgment on the Christian. The standard is different; the actuating motive is different; and the modification of affections, out of which in all cases human conduct immediately flows, is different.

To this it may be added, that a philosophical religion is founded on merits; out of which, if reduced into practice, the varied systems of fanaticism and superstition may be shown to arise. But this would lead us too far. The assumption of *human perfectibility* can only be practically maintained by the assumption of some erratic standard of perfection. It is easier to face death and suffer torture, than to withstand the appetencies and govern the passions. Man can no more change his own nature than the Ethiopian can change his skin.

## LETTER II.

### ON EMINENT SCEPTICS.

How it happens that the small, and, I admit, ingenious class of persons who have chosen to call themselves philosophers, are—to use your own words—to a man opposed to the Christian religion, is not so hard to explain, consistently with its being true all the while, as you imagine. In the ordinary affairs of life, you have been obliged to admit that they are not wiser than others. In their writings, also, you have found that they have not yet come to an agreement, upon any one of the speculative investigations for which they have so much ability and taste. The chief discovery, upon which these learned gentlemen seem to have agreed, is that, however proved in point of fact, Christianity is an imposition upon the credulity of vulgar persons. Upon the arguments by which this useful conclusion has been attained, they have not been able to agree; nor has the method of reasoning which they have found it expedient to use for this, been very available for any other practical purpose. Their talent and learning I grant—they have used them like those fabled giants of heathen antiquity, who to assail

the heavens, found it necessary to tear up and unsettle from their places the mountains of the earth. The ablest arguments which have, in the course of eighteen centuries, been brought to bear against the Christian religion, have equal force to overturn all knowledge and most principles of action. If I were disposed to meet your objections with the curt and evasive address, with which some of our philosophical friends are in the habit of turning off the subject, I might tell you that, however religion may be disproved by the sophistry of these gentlemen, we have yet no right to discard it, until we prove our sincerity, by rejecting every thing else that can by the same methods be disproved. We must act in opposition to our senses—we must abandon the moral as well as circumstantial analogies of our nature, on which all our reasoning and most of our knowledge is founded.

But I am really anxious to lead you into a full and serious consideration of the subject of your doubt, namely, the intellectual and moral characteristics of the sceptical philosophy. The writings of this school, you have not read: I have often pressed you to do so. We have not here to deal with them, and they have been fully and effectually replied to by wiser men. Our object here is, to consider to what degree of weight their names are entitled, in opposition to the proofs of revealed

religion. For this purpose, I will take their writings no further into account, than as examples of such conclusions as I shall be enabled to draw, as to the character of their understandings.

In the first place, the sceptic is necessarily subject to the operation of those general causes, which we have already shewn to arise from the constitution of human nature—and has, therefore, in common with mankind, a tendency to unbelief. Now the question is whether, supposing Christianity true, is he from those intellectual dispositions which are supposed to be peculiar to him, more fitted to overcome these obstacles or to yield to them; That is to say, are sceptics the fittest persons to be held up as tests of the authority of principles, by which their conduct is to be governed and their very reason controlled.

To give this discussion the greatest possible distinctness, first let us try how far they are the best authorities for any subject whatever.

Nothing can be more fully ascertained than the general fact, that upon all those weighty speculative questions, upon which eminently intellectual persons have, at all times, found most pleasure in exercising their minds, either from their difficulty or imagined importance, no two writers have ever, since the beginning of time, come to an agreement. All the great moral and metaphysical

questions, which divided the schools, have, with some unimportant exceptions, and some merely verbal modifications, found their way down to our own days, and found their several supporters amongst the motley academies of our own philosophy. Amongst these, there is no length of opposition to the common notions of mankind, or of each other, in which we may not find persons of the utmost subtlety and ingenuity, exercising their faculties with all the zeal of martyrs. So far, were we to go no farther, the inference would go to neutralize these intellectual combatants, and lead persons of sober judgment to set them altogether aside. But there is a further proposition before us: namely, that there is no antecedent probability, that persons of very acute and ingenious minds should attain to more just and sound conclusions, than persons of the most ordinary powers of intellect; next, that there is a strong probability against it. We may consider what faculties are actually employed by the legitimate objects of the human understanding; what faculties are usually shewn by the sceptic philosopher; and how far the possession of these is likely to lead to just conclusions, respecting the ordinary topics of human reason.

For the first it may be said, that it is the necessary character of just opinions to be strictly conformable with the truth of things; and therefore

to be independent of the powers of invention and theory, which, though useful as subordinate to more solid faculties, cannot be the principal ones, when the patient observation of WHAT IS, must be the first and chief care. The truth can only be known by a continued comparison of facts, by which alone, in the progress of time, the actual law of their existence and operations can be known. Now, for this purpose, great patience, great firmness in rejecting specious hypotheses, great comprehensiveness in preserving the whole, and great accuracy in correctly preserving and applying the parts of knowledge, are absolutely required in proportion to the real extent and depth of the subject. If, in all this process, invention can find any place, it can merely be so far as the theory upon which it acts is previously ascertained to be a true theory. Now in strict accordance with this, all known truths, of which we have any certainty, have been the laborious structures of much time, and long continued, as well as laborious investigation—their foundations consist in the common perceptions of mankind; their systems, series of connected facts—and their discoverers remarkable for soberness of understanding, and patient exertion of thought and observation; and this to a degree sometimes almost incredible, if we view them in comparison with ordinary characters.



In a word, the faculties most adapted for the discovery of truth, are not those by which eminent sceptics are chiefly distinguished. I proceed next to shew that eminent sceptics are likely, on the other hand, to adopt the side of error. Now here it is only necessary to remind you of the reputed character of the sceptic philosophy, that its disciples are remarkable for the ingenuity of the theories by which they have built systems of opinion, altogether independent of fact, and for the most part opposed to the experience of mankind; that subtlety, dexterity, refined distinction, and in a word, ingenious speculation, mostly beginning with abstract propositions, are the distinctions of the reasoning on which is founded that celebrity, which you appeal to for a sanction. It is not necessary, to prove this, by any detailed examination of their works, because it is enough that so far as their opposition to Christianity is concerned, such is the character of their most reputed writings. Never attempting to deal with its alleged proofs from fact, they have pretended to found their doubts upon *a priori* reasonings, drawn from systems previously constructed for the very purpose.

We have now arrived so far as this: the exercise of the faculties, indicated in observation of fact, and reasoning from experience, is differ-

ent *in kind* from that to be traced in abstract speculation.

In reasoning, as I am now about to do, on the characters of their minds generally, it is fair to say, that the conditions of my argument must of course include many eminent persons who are not sceptics—and within a certain limited extent, apply even to arguments which have been used on the side of known truths. If Hume had been a Christian, he would have written with inconclusive subtlety in support of revealed truth. He might have left us a demonstration of the being, and attributes, and an explanation of the whole plan and purposes of God, according to some exquisitely ingenious and highly wrought system of his own brain. In short, he would probably have still acted according to the natural constitution of his own mind.

But to our purpose ; which is next to estimate the probability of persons of highly speculative powers, attaining to the true conclusions with respect to religion. And here it is to be observed, that in attributing certain moral dispositions, which influence the understandings as well as the conduct of men, I would not be understood to imply that sceptics are in this respect worse than the generality of men. For, in fact, as I trust it will appear, it does not require the worst passions of

of the mind, or even the highest degree of any of those infirmities, of which we all participate, to mislead both the conduct and the judgment. I have already observed, that sceptics must, from the constitution of their nature, be liable to the errors and subject to the infirmities, in which I have fully traced the progress of unbelief—from these no mortal is exempt. To some of these, the intellectual constitution is in some degree more subject; with our faculties, our enjoyments and desires extend, and our temptations are increased: the love of fame, and chiefly of intellectual pre-eminence, becomes an engrossing passion, a strong impulse to great intellectual activity, chiefly tending to the exercise of those faculties which are felt to be predominant. Add to this the high and fastidious tone arising from a highly cultivated taste, and a morbid aversion to that which is in vulgar conversation—in short, a sense of separation, inevitably connected with human pride. To these may be added, the natural disposition to reject that which we cannot comprehend, much increased by the vain pretension to understand all things. Here, if I am not mistaken, you will at once perceive the formidable array of obstacles to the reception of the simple, but unsearchably profound—the common, yet imperfectly practicable—the severe, humbling and controlling system of the

Gospel. It is easy to point out with precision the application of these dispositions.

It is an obvious probability that persons possessing great invention and subtlety, must feel the natural disposition to employ and obtain distinction from their peculiar powers. But the proofs of Revealed Religion are certain plain matters of fact, universally intelligible, and to be ascertained by the ordinary use of the commonest faculties; and cannot be in any way made the subject of metaphysical ingenuity, still less of refined invention, without a total deviation from its actual grounds. It becomes, therefore, probable that persons of this cast of mind, will apply to it a method of enquiry of which it is not susceptible: and thus it may be anticipated that its actual evidence will be overlooked, in looking for evidence which does not belong to it. This probability derives added weight from the other conditions. The Gospel is directly opposed to the pride of the Philosopher; it rejects the wisdom on which he rests his pretensions, and calls upon him to take his place among the crowd whom he despises and dislikes. In common with numbers, he has no faith, and is obliged to admit it to be an infirmity, or maintain it by reason. The greater part of those vague but magnificent speculations, to which his mind is ever tending, are silenced

and overlooked by the truths of Christian doctrine, while his understanding is set at naught by the same. Adding to all this, the moral reasons which are common to all ; and then, to complete that character, an unbounded facility in finding reasons, and inventing systems ; of constructing proofs, and detecting or imagining objections ; and what is the plain inference ? It is this, that the universal unwillingness of the world, must be still increased in the ingenious speculator—that, in addition to his human dislike to the divine faith of Christ, he will also acquire a dislike peculiar to himself ; he will dislike the practical parts of Christianity, as debased by vulgar error and acceptance ; and the mysterious doctrines because he cannot explain them. That he will reject much, because it is opposed to a preconceived system within his own mind ; and much, because he has been able to invent a religion of his own, or something to supply its place, which he thinks may do as well. That he would become sceptical, because persons whom he contemns are not so ; and because some whom he admires, are. His pride is also, in a manner, urged by the necessity of the expedient : for, not having those great powers, by which some few eminent persons have raised to their own names immortal memorials, by the discovery of great practical truths—he finds

it to be the only road to the distinction of superior intellectual power, to raise objections, which are easily raised to any thing ; and to support them with the dexterity which can always be commanded by the advocate, on any side of any question.

In the conduct of the ordinary affairs of the world, instances now and then occur of the application of the same highly speculative faculties, which are here described ; and the result is so familiar, that I need not dwell upon it. Such reasoning applied to the business of the world is called visionary, eccentric, unpractical, and marked by that constant failure which sufficiently justifies the terms. The ingenious theorist, who discovers the fallacy of the common sense of mankind, and acts upon principles and plans of his own discovery, is called a Projector ; and though uniformly admitted to be very ingenious and very plausible in explaining and vindicating his theory, is trusted by no one, and as much reputed for failure as for cleverness. The same person, however, has only to turn his mind to those vague subjects of which mankind knows nothing, and he escapes the vigilance of common observation, and the test of fact ; he imposes on a few, and is called a Philosopher. But let him go a step further, and dexterously advocate the vices, the follies, and the natural

unbelief of mankind, and he is soon at the head of an accademy, who will set him up as an authority and a name.

So far we have been merely ascertaining the previous probability, whatever may be the fact. And were we to go no further, the point in question is fully established ; and all we are concerned to prove clearly follows, namely,—that no degree of literary eminence, for wit, subtlety, or speculative ingenuity, can be fairly said to have any weight as authority upon the sceptical side of the question : while at the same time their employment on the side of faith, derives additional weight, from the fact that it attests the force of truth, in opposition to the natural bias and leading characters of the mind. And thus, while the subtle metaphysics of Hume's mind disqualify him as a hostile authority, those of Berkeley do not disqualify the weight of his assent. In their common errors much may be found to explain and illustrate our reasoning.

I have already observed the great diversities of opinion, in the whole of that part of our literature which may be called *speculative*. In contrast with this may be noticed the general uniformity of opinion, which equally marks the *practical* portion. Des Cartes may be overthrown by Locke, and

Locke rudely shaken by his more modern antagonists and commentators. Hume and Berkeley, Reid, Stewart, and Brown may expend greater or less, but each very great powers upon speculative opinion, and yet not be able to settle amongst them one point of any acknowledged importance to the world. But in the other department, namely that of inductive science, questioning or waiting upon facts, and rigidly adhering to the laws of observed analogy, how opposite is the result. There is no difference between the physics of Newton and Laplace, but that which is implied in the progressive nature of knowledge. Now this opposition is not entirely dependant on the characters of the two several classes. It is also caused by the opposite nature of the subjects—speculation and fact—*a priori* arguments and arguments of analogy. In the earlier ages of natural philosophy, the same methods of inquiry were applied to Physics, which are now applied to Metaphysics, and with the same results—universal disagreement and no practical utility. Such then is the general character of metaphysical speculation; nor can it be expected to be a better guide in the obscurity of the unseen purposes, first principles, and nature of God, than it has been in unravelling the simpler difficulties of this visible world. If it has not dis-



covered Astronomy, I do not see why it should be expected to instruct us in religion.

Considering all this, which must necessarily be obvious to your mind, I cannot help sometimes feeling surprised, when you indulge yourself in reflections of a very general nature, upon the characters of eminent Christian divines, on the ground that they are not what you are pleased to call profound inquirers. Now, my dear friend, has it ever occurred to you to consider what you precisely mean by *profound*? Do you mean that depth of mind which discovers recondite truth, or that which lands its possessor in specious uncertainty? do you mean the unpractical subtlety, which has never yet succeeded further than to attain general scepticism; or the combination of moral and intellectual force, which has as uniformly and exclusively shewn itself in the discovery of admitted truth, and the rejection of exploded error? If you and I are agreed as to the meaning of this word, which I here select as one of many terms and phrases of like import, I utterly deny the inference you would draw. This and all such epithets must be understood with reference to the investigation of truth, and not with respect to the idea of difficulty in the subject, or dexterity in the inquirer, (if inquiry it can be called). The inven-

tor of many a childish puzzle might otherwise lay his claim to your philosophical veneration, and rank with the great fathers and patriarchs whom you worship with so much implicit faith, Herbert, and Hobbes, and Spinoza, and Hume, &c. who have all contributed in their several ways to enlighten the world by their different and opposite rules of action and thought. Would you but venture to examine these vaunted supporters of your scepticism, I think that, knowing your natural good sense, I could easily predict the consequence.

Setting aside some beauties of style, and much refinement of speculation, you would assuredly discover nothing to redeem these worthies from the more appropriate charge of shallowness and insincerity. Their arguments are always what you would call sophisms, where their premises are not gratuitous assumptions. And long before they could afford your mind the requisite satisfaction on the subject of religion, they would offend your sense of truth and right, together with your common sense, on every other. I do not however mean to assert that their conclusions are uniformly false, so much as that their reasonings are unphilosophical, and founded on a false notion both of the object and extent of human faculties; that their theories rest upon assumption, and are desti-

tute of proof; and that I am warranted in saying, that their distinguishing characteristic is unsoundness of understanding. The arguments of Hume are founded on definitions of what cannot be defined without conjecture; and to the uncertainty of definition is to be added equivocation in the use of words, well concealed from inaccurate readers by the apparent precision of his language, and the affectation of logical exactness in his reasoning.

There is a class of eminent intellectual sceptics, of another character; namely, the material school—the chemists, cosmogonists, and mathematicians; who, without having in reality the same claim to authority as the metaphysical schools, have so far the seeming advantage, that their objects of pursuit are in some way connected with reality. Nor can the peculiar constitution of their understandings be so distinctly seized upon, as that of the former. In speaking of the system-builder, and the speculative inquirer in the vague and infinite void of metaphysics, we are assisted by that continual appeal to observation, without which all affirmations upon the subject of mind must want evidence. The mathematician and the physical inquirer, mainly engaged in the consideration of sensible facts, and ascertained principles, are less liable to expose any peculiar infirmities of mental constitu-

tion. The strict limits of science restrain the understanding within the bounds of settled method and principle, and the severe test of observation and experiment is at hand to recal the physical inquirer to his narrow walk within the confines of real knowledge. He is therefore estimated by mankind, rather according to the importance and difficulty of that science, which while it usefully employs his powers, confines as well as conceals his infirmities—than by the real character of his intellect. But I must not prolong this letter, by dwelling upon facts universally recognized by the common sense of the world. I will only therefore state what has been very generally, though not universally observed with reference to these classes of persons. These observations I will state with the least possible comment, and simply as facts ascertained by experience.

First it is to be observed, that sceptics of this class are the inhabitants of countries, in which the only evidence offered for the Christian Religion is the authority of the Church ; and that so far as the French Schools (which may be regarded as their principal force) are concerned, this alone suffices to settle the point. But second ; it is frequently observed, that where there is a very remarkable development of the powers of abstract calculation,

a deficiency is evident in that moral perception, which is the main guide, both in the conversation of life, and in appreciating the force of that evidence contained in human actions. These persons may be such, either from constitution, or from habitual absorption in one class of thoughts, and inattention to another class; but such they are. And this is all our purpose requires—they are of all authorities the least thought of on every subject but the one. It may assist your conception to take examples of extreme cases; take, for instance, Scott or Shakspeare on the one side, and Laplace on the other. These great intellectual opposites may afford your mind a grasp of the subject more palpable to common sense, than any disquisition upon metaphysical principles; and enable you, by a moment's analysis of the simplest kind, to perceive that the moral and intellectual structure of these persons is so remotely different, that neither can, without violence to all known facts of mind, be supposed to succeed in the department of the other. That the moral perception and power of combination, which gives the true shade and consequence to every fact relative to human actions, on the one side, is unquestionably that most favorable to the appreciation of moral testimony. And that the ingenuity in devising expedients, and surmising

physical causes—the power of combining abstractions, and the dexterity in wielding the resources of calculation—so far from quickening, are rather likely to absorb, deaden, and render obtuse the moral perceptions. Which latter, indeed, must depend on the natural development, as well as habitual use of these finer, more useful, and commoner parts of our nature—the passions, affections, and sentiments of mankind.\* Leibnitz, as a mathematician, was an extraordinary genius and successful investigator: as a theological, moral, and metaphysical inquirer, he is now admitted to be among the most visionary of philosophical dreamers.

I regret the necessity of being a little tedious, but will relieve your attention by the story of our old friend Mr. S——. He was a sceptic, but being, as you know, a person of very reflecting habits, it occurred to him; that, as there was a very strong party at least in favour of Christianity, and as many able men believed in it—as also there were specious arguments for it: it was of much importance to a

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\* In addition to the above remarks, it has been truly observed by many, that the habit of constant attention to the operations of material causes, has the effect of an accounting mind in look for material connections, that it unconsciously substitutes the presence of secondary causation for first cause—thus attributing omnipotence to matter. From accounting for the effects traceable to certain principles, the mind naturally proceeds to account for all things from the same. Hence the defect.

conscientious sceptic, to ascertain precisely by what arguments it could be overthrown. He could not help feeling that his own objections were merely grounds of doubt ; that is, difficulties, not direct arguments. He also recollected that he had never fully examined the evidence for Christianity ; and, as he has since declared, found his scepticism itself subject occasionally to very unpleasant misgivings. Under these circumstances, he resolved to endeavor to set his mind entirely at rest, by undertaking a minute inquiry into the whole subject. Here then were two courses, which equally presented themselves ; one was to study the evidence in favor of Christianity, the other the arguments against it. Now there can be no doubt upon a rational mind, that the only correct method is the first : as a subject, in order to be affirmed or denied, must first be understood. The first principle of Scepticism, is however to reverse this order ; and, above all, in matters of religion. My friend, with all his strong sense, set out unconsciously on the principle that Christianity must be an imposture. He thought, therefore, that the effect of a specious argument in its favour could only be to unsettle his mind to no purpose ; and leave him in possession, at best, of a doubtful religion. He also laid it down, that if it were all a fallacy, there must

have been some argument devised, upon practicably intelligible ground, to prove its fallacy to men of reasonable minds and competent education. On these exprest grounds, with (as he has since admitted,) an unconscious dislike to Christianity, he came to a resolution to take up the works of the most respectable Sceptics; making a determination, that if they should not fully satisfy his mind, he would then read Paley, and see whether he might not become a Christian.

Accordingly he began by reading, for the first time, Hume's Essays. The first effect of this author was, that while he thought the arguments unanswerable, he felt that they brought no conviction. As this was, however, unsatisfactory, he resolved to read them a second time with more attention, questioning every position and argument from the beginning. The consequence was, that he quickly found that the very first principles stood in need of proof; that the reasoning was frequently ambiguous; and that many of the conclusions were simply examples of what is called the *reductio ad absurdum*. Unsatisfied with this writer, he read several others of less reputation; but found no better satisfaction. Some dealt in obvious misstatements, some in oblique sneers, some in abuse, many in low ribaldry and blasphemy. All who



dangerous forgetfulness and disinclination, which he felt to be the natural characters of his mind.

Should you, my friend, ever be induced to make the experiment of our friend, I am satisfied, from my knowledge of the soundness of your understanding, that the result would be similar in its nature. But, at the same time, I must say that it is a useless trouble ; to persons of indolent habits or imperfect education, it would also be hazardous. This I shall take occasion in a future letter to explain. I shall now bring this long letter to a close, with two remarks.

One is, that I have sometimes heard you say, in reply to observations substantially the same with those above, that the argument of authority did not rest on the opinions of Hume or any other deistical writer ; as there is a considerable body of eminent men, of known ability, who, without having written upon the subject, were known to be sceptics. Now, my friend, this you will, by a little consideration, perceive to be merely specious.—Like a large portion of mankind, they felt a natural disbelief; and without much or any intellectual effort, concluded against revealed religion ; as they committed other errors on other subjects, from an improper or insufficient use of their understandings. There is a distinction to be kept in view,

between intellectual power, and the disposition to use it rightly : this latter being, in truth, a moral and not an intellectual disposition. What is in the ordinary affairs of life called prudence, good sense, discretion, &c. is not more necessary for the due regulation of human conduct in the intercourse of life, than the same moral dispositions, though differently applied, for the guidance of the powers of the understanding to a useful end. "Such a one is clever, but wants common sense," is a common and just remark, and extends much further than it is usually applied. Whatever it is that guides the sober and impartial judgment of practical persons, to act and choose rightly in the most ordinary affairs, is the same which conducts the reason through the boundless field of intellectual speculation, among the million paths and by-ways of abstract possibility, to the truth. In this wide field the probability of error is so enormous, that there could be nothing certain, were it not for the fact, that rightly ordered understanding is governed by a principle widely different from abstract reasoning—namely, that of experience, of fact, and plain well observed analogy, arising from careful observation. In the use of these, the method natural to the human mind is to assume a conclusion

conformable with known laws, and then to investigate this by the analysis of reason. Here it is obvious, that a sober judgment and impartial temper are the only security against any degree of error. The assumption of a fallacy may be maintained by all the resources which reason can employ ; a common prejudice, a received fallacy, a wrong definition, a minute error lurking undetected in the use of a word ; may all be the basis of a texture of illusion, subtle beyond the powers of reason to unravel, until the almost impalpable principle has been traced to its concealment.

Independent of all this, the common pursuits of life so entirely turn away the minds of many men of the soundest understanding from their spiritual concerns, that they may be said, with much truth, to be entirely ignorant about them. About religion, it does not occur to these persons to think seriously ; they know nothing of its evidences, and their faculties have received an entirely different direction. Such persons are sceptical or not, for reasons unconnected with their understandings. They take their opinions from their habitual associations and pursuits, and never reflect at all upon the matter ; or if they do, it is without having before them the only proper materials for just reflection. You love to scrutinize

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the conduct of the Christian — pray apply the same justice to the rationalizing Sceptic : if you find him imprudent in common affairs, and wrong in subjects of less difficulty, do not take him for your guide upon a subject, in which all reasons concur to make him still more liable to err.

The second remark is this. That he who immediately passes from Hume to Paley must always feel like one awakened from vague dreams into the plain day-light, and the use of his senses in the ordinary way. Paley uses no metaphysical first principles, no new methods of reasoning ; and is utterly devoid of what is called ingenuity, invention, or subtlety. His arguments are of the very plainest and most usual kind ; such as you find uniformly used, wherever there is acknowledged truth in other things. He proves the facts of Christianity, by the same arguments by which a sound lawyer would prove the origin and authenticity of Magna Charta, if you can imagine it called into question. The most uneducated person, if possessed of average intellect, could fully understand him at first reading. The cleverest casuist who ever wrote, could not answer him without much deviation from the laws of right reasoning. Of this, at least, you may easily assure yourself. Mr. Hume, who was not thoroughly

satisfied with his own reasoning, has observed, "it is the character of the sceptical reasoning to be unanswerable, and to produce no conviction." A few years must have convinced him, that however little worth his reasoning had been as to its object, it was not at least unanswerable. His writings have been answered fully, frequently, and conclusively; they are thrown out of his own school now. Now, on the contrary, the arguments of Paley, which are merely arranged and systematized from earlier writers, have never been answered or assailed. The sceptics of at least sixteen centuries have found it uniformly expedient to steer at a safe distance from them; and to take refuge in less tangible grounds, in subtle mysteries of school metaphysics, where the difficulties of the subject, vagueness of language, and the ignorance of man have enabled them to preserve the dignity, if not the truth of philosophy. By such means, or by the less respectable resources of depraved wit and coarse sophistry, directed to the uneducated alone, has the cause of Scepticism been supported.

Now, my friend, if all this is true, consider the consequence. Do you really suppose that, for nearly two thousand years, a false and fraudulent scheme should stand supported by the arguments of truth; while those opposed to it should be

equally characterized by the reasoning and arts of imposture, folly, and self-delusion? If you worship Reason, look to this: see that the oracles and high priests of your faith have not justly characterized themselves, in the symbol which they once chose for themselves, when their opinions held a momentary reign, and produced their legitimate effects. They set up a courtesan to be the worship of a great nation, and called her the Goddess of Reason. Believe me, my friend, that this was but the natural consequence of the principles from which they set out.

### LETTER III.

#### ON MYSTERIES.

ONE of your most frequently repeated objections against the Christian religion is, that some of its tenets are unintelligible, and others contrary to reason; and that you cannot be expected to believe either what you cannot comprehend, or what you cannot reconcile to your understanding. And you add, that even granting the truth of these things, yet you cannot conceive yourself bound to believe against your senses. These absurd objections are so constantly made, that I must endeavor to meet them with great distinctness; though somewhat embarrassed by the circumstance, that the answers to them are so obvious, that they who make the objections can hardly be presumed not to know them. And it becomes a difficulty not merely of argument, but as to the most effectual method of dealing with minds so quick at inventing cavils—so slow in the perception of the plainest inferences of right reason.

You trust your life to your physician, who probably cures you by the administration of a poison: you eat and drink, without clearly comprehending how you are nourished by food: and you resign

yourself to sleep, without being aware by what process you recover yourself from its temporary death. When you search through the works of nature, there is nothing which you are able fully to explain: and if by chance you do thoroughly comprehend any thing, it is only because it is an invention of beings as limited in mind and power as you are yourself. It is not easy to see, therefore, why you should refuse to place in your Creator as much confidence as you freely lavish upon every person or thing, which has any relation to your thoughts or actions—unless that, in this instance alone, your *inclination* being at variance with your ordinary principles of action, you are led into cavils which might, with equal ease, be invented on any other subject.

If the Almighty God had ordained it as a condition essential to salvation, that you should be able distinctly to comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity—or in what precise manner the death of the Redeemer is a sufficient atonement for the sins of mankind—or by what mode of operation the invisible spirit can be present to and affect our inmost thoughts—and many other such questions; in this case, I would admit that there would be much force in your objections. The question would then stand thus: has God exacted from his



creatures a degree of knowledge far surpassing the measure of intellect with which he has endowed them?—a question to which I confess I cannot pretend to perceive the answer. But, my dear friend, the Gospel is encumbered with no such inconsistent conditions. The case stands thus: certain doctrines are offered to your mind; not upon their peculiar merits, or on the strength of any intrinsic evidence as to their fitness or reasonableness; but upon the authority of God. This authority constitutes the whole of their claim upon your assent; and (if there must be a question) is the only question that can rationally be entertained. You are entitled to scrutinize their credentials: these must be plain, and clearly adapted to the nature of the human understanding; but you are in reason bound to confine yourself to their consideration. If God has announced certain facts, relative to his plan, attributes, or system of government—not discoverable by man, and not quite explicable according to the principles of worldly things—there is nothing in this different from the entire analogy of our knowledge. It is enough that the facts are so; proof can go no further. And if this is sufficient, the sceptic's complaint amounts to the absurdity of endeavoring to substitute explanation for proof: and of also

demanding of the God of Heaven a knowledge of the universal system, which he would think it absurd to look for with regard to the most familiar objects of human perception.

A mystery is that which cannot be explained from known principles. And this difficulty exists only in relation to our actual knowledge: to a man born blind, there is a mystery in vision; to a man born deaf, in sounds. If a person were educated apart from mankind, more than half what passes in life, with all systems of government, would be mystery. To man, under any circumstances, the system by which he is connected with a future state of being, must be full of mystery: such is Religion. But between the mysteries of religion and those of nature, there are some important differences. The natural mysteries are mostly phenomena offering themselves to our senses, and not to our faith; and requiring rather to be accounted for, than believed or disbelieved. They are also totally disconnected with any law of obligation, and therefore never come into collision with those moral and animal dispositions, upon which human conduct is mainly founded. For this reason, the passions are not strongly enlisted against them, and the reason is left to its proper course. Next, they are not connected with awful

fears, which make their serious entertainment too depressing for the ordinary class of worldly persons. Lastly, no one is by any law enjoined to believe in them. Consequently, they are tacitly overlooked by the ignorant, and impartially examined by the studious. Intellectual curiosity and human ambition find their interest in developing their hidden wonders to the light. But with the difficulties, which equally form the boundaries of human knowledge, in the scheme of things to which we belong as members of a future state, it is entirely different.

They are not perceptible to the senses; they are the foundations of the most sacred obligations; they are indissolubly joined with the most awful and impressive sanctions of hope and fear; and they are the subject of faith. Hence, as I have already shewn at length, the unwillingness of the heart is added to the limits and the sophistry of the intellect.

There are, however, in the objections to revealed religion, on the account of difficulties, some peculiar absurdities, which I will endeavor to point out in order, and as distinctly as I can.

Bishop Butler, with unanswerable force, proves that in any system emanating from the author of nature, or in the ordinary economy of Providence,

such difficulties should be looked for. Their absence would amount to a strong presumption against a Religion. On the other hand, too, it is evident, that if any man were intelligent and sober-minded enough, to have compiled the ablest and most beneficial scheme of morality that the world has known, he would not have gratuitously loaded it with conditions—calculated in a high degree to call forth the opposition, and to awaken the scepticism of all succeeding ages.

So FAR, then, it appears that such difficulties are necessary to the supposition of a religion having come from God ; and that they are inconsistent with the supposition of an origin in human invention.

But there is a point of view still more important, because more direct. To give the greatest possible distinctness to this view, in which the whole subject may be said to be implicitly contained ; let us endeavor to ascertain how far the necessity of the existence of these mysteries, is to be inferred from the actual conditions of the Christian religion. All your objections to the system rise from the supposition, that Christianity is a system intended for the improvement and perfection of human society. This assumption is, however, purely gratuitous. Human society is never considered in

Scripture, or by any Christian Church, in any other light than as *subsidiary to a future state* : with the religion of politics we are in no way concerned. The religion of the Gospel is the connection between this and a future state ; and to be considered in this view alone. When you depart from this, you are talking of something else—which I am in no way pledged to defend here.

From the very nature and design of revealed religion, it must contain doctrines beyond the understanding of bounded intelligences. Its essential purpose is, to disclose to us the hopes and fears, the laws and conditions which affect us, in relation to another state of being totally distinct from this present state. A scheme of truths, which, when fairly pursued towards their real design, are to be resolved into the purposes of God, must necessarily terminate far beyond the survey of human intelligence. But it is enough to say, that it must contain references to that other state, to which its purpose is to turn our minds and affections. It must tell something of the preternatural instrumentality, by which we are members of another kingdom. It must say something of that God, for whose purposes we are to exist. In so doing, too, it must not only adhere, as far as it goes, to

the truth ; but it must break off at some points, where further revelation has no present purpose, and where human intelligences cease. Now from all these conditions, mystery is the necessary result.

Let us then, for a moment, try to estimate some of the rational probabilities, as to the more extended system of being to which we are thus led. There has been, upon this subject, abundance of splendid speculations ; but I will confine myself here to inferences from the facts of Christianity.

A world of angels, of departed souls, and of evil spirits are certainly comprehended in the whole system of divine government ; of which, therefore, without resorting to conjecture, however probable, the scene of human life must necessarily form a very small and subordinate part. But as all these are interwoven, as parts of a single plan, and to be combined eventually in a single scene, and perhaps finally subjected to one great division into good and evil ; it follows, that to consider *justly* the part we know, we must consider it as a part of the whole, according to the principles and intent of which it cannot but exist. Now to do this, we must either thoroughly understand the whole system of being from end to end ; or be still ignorant of much, even of that part which we know best. When therefore you speak of Chris-

tianity, and ask in your compendious way, why should there be any mystery? why should there be any thing difficult to the simplest understanding? it may be replied, that we know as much as we are concerned to know, and have no right to complain that we are left ignorant of what does not concern us. And when you add, why then are these latter truths at all presented to bewilder us? the answer here suggested is, that the great truths of the divine dispensation are inseparably combined. To have given us a simple system, founded on our actual experience, would have been to have given us a system *not the true one*, a system, not that of God—instead of that *real* system, by which we are actually connected with the rest of his universal kingdom, every part of which must be upheld by the same conservative law, which unites, governs, and preserves the whole. To worship God at all, it must be God as he actually exists—not as we have the power of imagining his existence. The doctrines of Christianity either refer to this, or to the scheme of our redemption; this latter must have reference also to the general plan of which it is part, and not to our particular notions of it. It must be construed with reference to the *purpose* of God—or *not at all*. Here we can go to a limited extent, but this is calculated to intimate the existence of

a wider and obscurer field. We pass over some well known points, to fix on one which is less thought of than its importance merits. Besides the merciful intent of redeeming us from everlasting destruction, we are as fully aware of another principle—the vindication of the attributes of God in the face of the universe of moral being, against the extensive and powerful opposition of the Evil Archangel and his legions.

The principles of a religion coming from God, and having a purpose to endure beyond this visible state, must be in their nature uniform, constant, and of universal application. But the stages of opinion, to which human speculation refers them, are transient, and perpetually on the change. What is just and expedient according to the notions of any one age, nation, or philosophical sect, is not so in another Period, Latitude, or School. All of these are equally confident in their opinions, each holds itself to be standing on the highest point of human knowledge. The Religion of the Gospel belongs to no age, and to no school ; wherever it comes, it offers itself efficaciously to the sober minded of all—is equally intelligible to the peasant and the sage, as a practical system, and equally inexplicable as a speculative theory ; claiming assent not less on the rational tangibility of its doc-

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trines, than on the certainty of its evidences, and the experimental efficacy of its practice. It is, as it should be, mysterious from beginning to end. Its author and end, God—its immediate object, our preservation from a state of which we know nothing, our redemption to a state of which we know nothing, and our conduct in a state of which we know little *truly*. If the Sceptic ~~other~~ should have his difficulties cleared up, other difficulties beyond them must infallibly arise, until he should become percipient of all that is known to God. Unless with more advanced knowledge we also suppose more deep humility, and a more reasonable spirit of enquiry; and that arriving, as finite intelligence sooner or later must, at the boundary of knowledge, the extravagance of conjecture and the presumption of Scepticism should be restrained by the sane assurance, that there still lies beyond it in every direction, a universe of unknown truth, ordered by an infinite and inscrutable wisdom.

I will conclude this letter by pointing your attention to the true cause of the class of objections, of which we now speak; it is very comprehensive, and may serve to account for the existence of many other species of objection also. Namely, an inverse method of reasoning. In all other

branches of our knowledge, we begin at the beginning ; or as nearly so as our means of information will admit of. In the concerns of religion, we begin but too often with presumptuous inquiries on those remote and ultimate conclusions, which are farthest removed from the sphere of sense and ordinary reasoning. This I will endeavor to illustrate by a familiar analogy.

It has been attempted by an eminent mathematician, to draw an inference favorable to Christianity, from the existence of mystery in mathematics. The argument has much weight. But how does it happen, that an inference not clearly intelligible to human conception, should not also be an objection to mathematical reasoning ?

The true reason is this : in mathematics you begin with definitions, and having, by means of the simplest reasoning, established a basis of most obvious and easy conclusions, you advance by steps of equal ease and certainty upward, through a systematic process, from inference to inference, until some conclusion presents itself, fortified in the evidence of the strict and inevitable reasoning by which you have attained to it—but yet utterly irreconcilable with your ordinary notions acquired from perception. Now here, what is the consequence ? You admit it from the very first, on

the faith of mathematical reasoning. You have ascended from step to step, from one notion to another immediately above it in the chain of inferences; until that appears true, which perhaps you might have pronounced irreconcilable to your reason. If instead of being the objects of reason, the doctrines of the higher geometry had been made dependent upon faith, and in some way connected with conscience and inclination, they would instantly be converted into the objections of scepticism and the stumbling-blocks of unbelief. The proofs would be overlooked, and the results called absurd, contradictory, and unintelligible.

I am not ignorant that very eminent mathematicians assert that there are no mysteries in mathematics. These persons, however, are under a mistake as to the meaning of the word. When they say that there is nothing contrary to reason in mathematics, they say no more than may be said for religious truths. What is mystery to us, may be nothing more than common sense in Heaven. There can exist nothing irreconcilable to reason, in the strict sense. It is enough for our purpose, that there are mathematical conclusions, which have amongst mathematicians *passed for such*, and yet in no instance excited mathematical scepticism. As the geome-

trician makes a further progress, we may allow that an increased accuracy of conception, and perhaps a new method of thinking may result; and then it may be perceived, that the difficulty arose from not rightly interpreting an expression, or from some error as to the true law of mathematical reasoning. To discover this has, in the mean time, been an advance in knowledge. In opposition to all this, when a person of sceptical understanding applies to religious truth, his conduct is to begin by enquiring into the reasonableness of those results, which a little sober reflection would have told a steadier understanding, must necessarily be placed beyond the reach of human inquiry. And before he ever thinks of the usual and natural process of looking to their proofs, he asks the strange and absurd question, whether they are possible, conceivable, or fit?—questions which can no more be answered, than when an infant asks who lives in the sun. He therefore rejects religion on the very grounds that he would reject mathematics, if he had any real or imaginary interest in their rejection. I might here refer you back to your own adventure with the mountain philosopher, mentioned in a former letter. But indeed you have often had occasion to see all the spirit of scepticism fully shewn upon similar occasions. For

independent of all our natural prejudices against religious restraints and impositions, it is quite evident, that to deny what they do not understand is the first impulse of most men. That there is a contrary impulse, is no objection to this. Man is made up of contending impulses, which obey their several laws of action ; and though they make his conduct inconsistent under similar circumstances, yet offer no difficulty to the general reasoner. Thus you know those who, while they fastidiously reject the mysteries of religion, hold opinions of their own still less reconcilable with reason, and not so well supported by proof. The Sceptic who pretends to reject religion on account of those miracles, without which it could not be reasonably authenticated, believes in the miracles of his own fancy ; he is imposed upon by the chimeras of some visionary philosophy ; and is above all men generally credulous and liable to be deceived in all things relative to human character and actions. But this inconsistency is reconciled by the fact that his arguments are but a flimsy pretence, which neither impose upon himself or any body else ; and that the secret of his philosophy is the deranged moral affection of a prejudiced or a reluctant mind.

In truth, it is impossible for any person of really profound intellect to reason far upon any

subject, without coming to some inscrutable difficulty, which has perplexed the philosophy of ages. The sciolist alone can cut every knot ; he explains what he pleases to explain, and denies the rest. He measures infinity with an ease proportioned to the shallowness of his sight, and the shortness of his line.

## LETTER IV.

### ON MYSTERIES.

The substance of my last letter may be thus summed: a system, which exists in relation to another unknown, and therefore mysterious state of being, must necessarily contain mysteries; and therefore, any objection on the ground of mystery, must assume that Religion is a forgery.

There is no subject, however, upon which the human mind can be employed that is not replete with mystery. And I now proceed to shew that Christianity is not more beset with difficulties, than it is also an effective means of resolving many difficulties otherwise insoluble. This is itself among its many proofs: the fact which reasonably explains a difficulty not otherwise to be solved, is itself a probable inference from those conditions which constitute the alledged difficulty. Now Christianity is the inference from many such questions.

If we trace back the steps of the sciences and known institutions, of history and tradition, it is to be ascertained that the human race, together with the system of animated nature now in existence, has begun to exist within certain limits of time comparatively recent. By means equally certain, it is

settled that the globe which we inhabit has been at no very remote period subject to a great physical revolution. From history we find records of the beginnings of nations and national customs, which records appear to have an evident yet unconcerted agreement in many leading particulars; but are, at the same time, so loaded and confused with monstrous disagreements and absurdities, as to afford no clue as to their true origin. To account, in a plain, rational, and consistent manner, for the existence, agreements, and disagreements of these—by a history, which, without containing any of their extravagancies, presents a master-key to them all—reconciling actual knowledge with early history and tradition, and reducing, without design, all the perplexities of ancient history and philosophy into a clear, consistent, and thoroughly reasonable system—such a consummation could not have been the work of human invention, as it would have required more power of combination, and more knowledge of facts than any one could have possessed or acquired. The history of the world must indeed have remained through all time a mystery of mysteries, were not all the greater difficulties of ancient history reduced to the simplest order in one history, the earliest of all; and this so naturally and simply, that in the words



of a well-known writer, "The history recorded by Moses appears like a bright but remote object, seen through the glass of an excellent Optician,—clear, distinct, and well-defined: but when we look back on the accounts transmitted concerning the Assyrians, the Egyptians, Medes, and Scythians, or those of the early ages of Italy and Greece, we find nothing but a series of incredible and inconsistent events." And here, if any one supposes that so clear a history, a philosophy, and a religion, could by any human intelligence be extracted from the confused philosophies and monstrous religions of antiquity, let it be remembered, that these uncouth abortions are the efforts of the greatest names existing during a long succession of ages, to fix religion and morality upon reasonable grounds. And while they display all the highest human faculties in their greatest perfection, they have not led to a single result, sufficiently fortified in reason or authority to stand the test of the inquiry of after ages; or at best, that may not be traced to some anterior source, and this in such a manner, as to connect them by all the truth they happen to possess, with the one primitive history.

If you desire a strong confirmation of this view, I would beg of you to turn your attention to the philosophy of some modern writers; who have ven-

tured to desert the sober beaten track of the modern inductive philosophy, in order to discover, by mere speculation, the origin of the world, together with the source and principle of human life, independently of revelation and sacred history. In these days of great comparative knowledge, you may thus observe the human mind repeating those natural errors which, from the most distant times, it has never ceased to commit: unconsciously wandering back to the dark labyrinths of the heathen philosophy; drawing the most important conclusions from the vaguest and most gratuitous assumptions; and this, indeed, with a rashness and precipitancy, from which it might be thought, that those ingenious persons were struck with some infatuation, for the purpose of making it quite apparent, how little we should discover upon these important points, if left to our own powers of discovery.

I need not dwell upon the inextricable mystery, which, on any supposition but the one, is stamped upon the history of the Jewish nation. The subject is too often and too well discussed; and would, indeed, of itself bear the whole conclusion in favour of Christianity. I shall have to notice it again under another head.

There is a class of notions, which may be traced

to all nations and ages, from the very first notices of human history, and which are inexplicable on any supposition but that of divine revelation. And by a coincidence very remarkable, these are the leading doctrines of all religions which can be traced to an early origin. In the more barbarian forms of religion, these are either much distorted, or disguised, or partially obliterated. But in the Mosaic and Christian religion, they remain in their primitive integrity—undisguised, and undefiled by the admixture of human opinions. These are, in fact, themselves the mysteries of our creed. Now what we would affirm is this—that if we suppose these difficult and unintelligible notions to be human inventions, the proposition is opposed to all our knowledge of the human mind. It is a manifest absurdity to suppose the fundamental notions of religion, in which all mankind seem without any concert to have concurred, to have no foundation in fact or right reason.

There is surely less difficulty attendant upon the supposition, that the system of existence and of government, which is carried on within the council of God, contains something too profound for finite reason to comprehend; than in the strangely extravagant notion, that the priests and rulers of all the widely scattered nations and poli-

ties, from the earliest time, should have concurred in the unauthorized adoption of ideas, so remotely beyond all the elements of human thought. This consideration derives added weight from a view of those religious notions, which can actually be traced to human invention ; and which the philosophers and empirics of all ages have ever laboured to substitute for the primitive notions of religion. In these may be found the real workings of fraud and superstition. There is between the two classes a difference not easily overlooked—the one being the obvious result from the principles of human nature, and the known state of human civilization at some era : the other, absolutely untraceable to these or any other known first principle, afford no tangible ground either for explanation or denial ; they are not either opposed to right reason, or to be reconciled by it, but are clearly beyond its sphere. Indeed, it has invariably been the office of superstition, to bring down religion to the level of human passions, by giving a body to the most spiritual ideas—by inventing images for the senses to lay hold of, or for the fancy to amuse or terrify itself with. But the doctrine of the Trinity, and that of the atonement by sacrifice—both of which are fundamental ideas of religion—together with the doctrines of free grace and justification by faith, with which the gospel has completed and

in some measure explained the system, these are demonstrably not amongst the productions of human mind, and are therefore unaccountable on any supposition but that already mentioned.

There is another difficulty not less obvious to deep reflection, but which I confess requires much thought to bring it fairly before the mind. The inconsistencies and the contradictions which exist in our actual state, and in the moral and intellectual habits of our minds, are too familiar to be impressive. The thoughtless deny them, the shallow call them human nature, and the ingenious invent theories to account for them, in which sober truth or sound reason has no part. The mind is still unsatisfied in proportion to the clearness of its thoughts. The difficulties which arise in comparing man's moral and intellectual nature with his actual state ; the intellectual desires, ever tending far beyond knowledge or the means of knowledge ; the moral sentiments of hope, fear, desire, expanding far beyond the probabilities of this life ; the constant tendency to act in opposition to our immediate well-being ; the universal tendency to and against religion ; all these, upon which I forbear to dwell at length, are accounted for by the doctrines of Christianity and them alone. Of these I will only point your attention distinctly to one, as you have yourself noticed it often ; namely, the

disposition which is so universal to acquiesce in principles of right and virtue—to these add religion—in theory, and to reject them as they affect the conduct. Now all this is plainly interpreted by the religion of the Bible. It is no more than the great first principles which the apostle so fully demonstrates, and which experience, though it could not discover, has not failed to confirm—the fall of man, and the consequent depravation of his whole nature, which is the universal and obvious consequence. The law of sin is in truth of the same importance in the moral, that the law of gravitation is in the physical world. Nothing can be rightly understood until it is taken into account. The general assent to the awful facts of revealed religion, taken together with the small comparative effect they produce on the feeling and conduct of the sincerest believers, is, after all that may be said, a moral difficulty of the first magnitude, until the “enmity against God” is admitted, and the general corruption of a fallen being taken fully into account. It may indeed be fearlessly asserted, that the Bible—itsself authenticated by the most irrefragable proofs, as the revelation of all that is necessary to be known upon the origin, the nature, and destination of the human race—offers no difficulties so great as those to which it is the only rational and consistent expositor.

The last point to which I must request your attention on this subject is, that, had it been the object of Christ and his disciples to deceive mankind into a system of belief, it would obviously be a part of their plan to guard against those objections which they must from the beginning have foreseen. This I say, not only because this could not have escaped the most cursory attention, and because the whole of the moral and practical part of the system gives an unparalleled proof of fore-sight and sagacity, but in fact, because those very things are foretold in the book itself. Had our Lord and the sacred writers either designedly, or undesignedly imposed upon mankind, the mysteries of our faith are not precisely such as they would have imposed ; for they are such, that, unless they are truths, they have neither operation nor distinct meaning. It is one thing to have a spiritual efficacy, and another quite distinct, to be understood : a proposition may be received as coming from God, and like Him be inexplicable ; but then, such are not the inventions of crafty and sagacious men. Art would address itself to the passions, and offer a sensual paradise—imagination, inflamed by fanatic zeal, would have addressed imagination, and offered some tenth Heaven of pomp and picture. The philosophic visionary would have imposed by the speciousness of his reasoning, and

founded his creed upon the rules of logical reasoning. Some ground-work for the mysteries would appear either to the reason or the sense. But the mysteries of the Bible are equally remote from fancy or reason ; they stand on no earthly basis, and are obviously not thoughts belonging to the mind of man. Their assertors could not have invented them, been imposed upon by them, or fully understood them. They are therefore *only* to be taken as communications from God ; not for the purpose of exciting a presumptuous curiosity, but because they are eternal truths, connected with our welfare. They may be intended at the same time to exercise that faith, which is among the highest virtues which our darkened state admits of ; while they serve to exhibit to the thoughtful mind, remote but sublime glimpses of truth beyond this low state, and obscurely intimate the awful distance we have before us in the scale of being, before we can approach the sacred counsels of the Eternal.

I think then, my friend, that we may conclude that a religion which you admit to be founded upon first principles of virtue, is not a structure of unintelligible absurdity or obscure fanaticism—suppositions, which, when plainly stated, appear too gross for sane understandings to adopt.



## LETTER IV.

### SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

To prove the truth of Christianity forms no part of the purpose of these letters; it is a distinct subject, and one of extensive detail. You refuse to enter upon it. If you did not, instead of writing these letters, I should have to refer you to Paley and the many other able writers, who have devoted their best talents to the subject. But in answer to your constant assertion, that there is neither is nor can be any proof, it becomes a part of my duty to offer a slight summary of that which is offered: you will thus have yourself the power to judge whether it is not such as to be fairly open to the common sense of mankind, and as such, liable to be overthrown without any great effort of reason; if it were not upheld by truth. You may, in common with many, have imagined, that the Christian religion is maintained by specious sophistry, and the subtle resources of dexterous advocacy, such as we have already described, as being employed in opposition to it. Were this the fact, it would undoubtedly weigh strongly against it; for such are not the means by which truth is

maintained in any undoubted instance. But the great distinction between the reasons on either side, consists in this, that the leading advocates of the Christian religion are, of all writers on any subject, those who have, with the most unbending sternness of purpose, adhered to fact alone, rejecting as suspicious those deviations into abstract reasoning, in which the whole of scepticism consists. They have sought out no difficult, doubtful, and contested first principle, or invented no system, for the purpose of establishing a historic fact. Their resources have been the same rules of evidence, the same laws of probability and of nature, which are the governing and conducting principles of all mankind. And so far from their proofs having been overthrown, they can scarcely be said to have been even assailed. Christianity, however it may be questioned by the deist, is as fully established in the body of literature, as it is possible for a fact to be, being maintained by all the varied proofs of which from its nature it admits of ; none of which have not been established by every test ; and any one of which would, if rightly understood, be enough to sustain it.

The Christian religion is antecedently probable. To this consideration I would not be understood to attach any importance as proof ; it relies on a

species of reasoning to which I object, as not being strictly within the limits of our reason. But the value of it is this, that at the outset, it neutralizes the whole body of that scepticism, which is virtually founded on the assumption of the opposite principle, viz.—its antecedent improbability. That the Creator of the human race endowed man with religious tendencies, and either taught or infused certain general notions connected with these, is admitted fact: that in this there was *some design* is probable. That the *operation* of this design is to be discerned somewhere amongst the religious manifestations of mankind, is but a reasonable inference; which, though not necessary perhaps, is still the greatest probability: and if so, that amongst these, that manifestation most connected with the highest degree of civilization and the purest morality, most uniformly traceable to an early origin, and most rationally accounting for the superstitions of mankind,—that this should be the real manifestation of the will of the great Designer, is a moral probability of a very high order. Next, that this particular manifestation should be marked by the union of mysterious doctrines with highly practical precepts, is equally to be presumed from a combined consideration of the source and the objects of religion.

But there is also another set of considerations which equally designate the probably true religion; those connected with its reception amongst mankind. This I will explain. The existence of moral evil is a fact; the concurrent existence of religious and anti-religious tendencies is another; from which the existence of some remedial system, in the nature of a revealed religion, and its consequent opposition to the existing depravation of human nature, is a probability too obvious to require proof: and therefore also, the universal tendency to resist the true religion is another antecedent probability of a high order—approaching indeed to the character of necessity. And it may be remarked, by the way, how opposite in this respect is the reception given to all other religions; which may be observed to obtain increased regard, in proportion as they depart from that which may be viewed as that great original type, from whence they have aberrated into representations of all the infirmities of superstition and passion. On these points, volumes of argument might easily be written; but this is enough for our purpose; the Christian religion is antecedently probable, scepticism is not. The one inference follows from the other; the *a priori* philosopher is deprived of the very chaos within which he would hide.

The next consideration in the order of priority is the argument from prophecy—a clear, unanswerable, and sufficient proof, if no other existed. This argument has recently been laid before the public, with great clearness and unanswerable force, by the Rev. A. Keith of Edinburgh; and so far as the principles of reason are concerned, I would stake the whole question on the conclusiveness of this argument.\*

In this work it is shewn, from the writings of *sceptical* historians, that the prophecies contained in scripture, on the events of the world, have been uniformly and literally fulfilled; and that these various fulfilments, were such as to have been, not merely beyond the contemplation of the prophets, but also antecedently improbable: in some cases requiring changes, which are known to have occurred, in the physical character of countries; in others, moral and political revolutions, which would require centuries to effect. In some of these, the changes were so remote in time and character from any thing known, that the very first ideas of them could not be supposed to exist, without conceding the disputed claim to divine inspiration; or lastly, in most of these, a concurrence of contingencies so remote in time, so precise

\* Evidence of Prophecy, &c.

in adaptation, and so impossible to be anticipated, that when the whole series is taken together—if the prophecy be admitted—the solution that admits of divine instrumentality is the least marvellous. The authorities, from which this argument is supported, are such indeed as not merely to confirm it, but to extend in a wonderful manner, the view which it affords of the continued forethought and vigilant superintendence of that great All-disposer of minds, in still making the good and evil alike instrumental to his purposes ; as it exhibits, and this with remarkable clearness, the wonderful fact, that such men as Gibbon, &c. were provisions within the very scope of providential design, to raise up the most authoritative of all commentators on his word—its professed enemies.

That particular part of the argument which relates to the coming of Christ, stands also on its peculiar evidence of the same character and force—hostile testimony, and *particular* fulfillments, antecedently impossible to be anticipated. The prophecies were preserved by the Jews, by whom Christ was crucified and his disciples persecuted ; and who, with the same scriptures in their hands, deny him still. The particulars, minute, numerous, unusual, comprising apparent impossibilities, were all, by concurrence almost

miraculous, exactly fulfilled in his life and death. So much for the evidence of prophecy. The acutest of the sceptics could only oppose it by the wild assertion, that it was written after the events. Such is the candor and such the reasoning of the sceptic.

The argument from testimony is that which comes home to the common sense of mankind; it is that on which the world is accustomed to rely in the practical pursuits of life—and when legitimately derived, universally felt to be conclusive. Its best example is the evidence of christianity—full, simple and accurate as it is possible for reason to conceive or require. There are different arguments into which it is combined, each containing something of a peculiar force, but relying on a common principle. I will specify the chief, referring you to the best writers for the details. One is the direct argument from testimony. First, the genuineness and authenticity of the sacred books is proved by shewing the care with which they were preserved; the publicity of their use, and the frequency of their citation as authorities, as well by opponents as advocates. Next, the truth of the witnesses to the facts thus narrated, is established by an argument which may be conveniently stated in this brief form. These witnesses must have

been intentional deceivers ; or imposed upon themselves ; or their testimony must be true in all respects : a statement which includes all possible suppositions. But the two first being shewn to be in the highest degree inconsistent with probability, so as to amount to an unprecedented and unauthorized violation of the known laws of nature, *the third necessarily remains established.* It is made perfectly certain that they were not deceived, and assure that they were not impostors : and no alternative remains, but to insist upon a moral impossibility, or assent to christianity. You may object, that there is at best an alternative here, that you are still at liberty to chuse between adverse improbabilities ; but it is not so. The miraculous agency of Christ and his apostles is as probable, as that God might have chosen to reveal himself to mankind in the only way, that could amount to proof of divine agency ; that is, by signs not within the ordinary compass of merely human agency. A miracle can only be considered as improbable, on the grounds of inadequate power or inadequate motive ; these being shewn, improbability entirely ceases, and the question becomes shifted to the evidence of fact. The improbability which the sceptic would choose, is a violation of the known laws of nature, a miracle without adequate power



or motive ; and, of course, in the highest degree improbable and absurd.

The next argument of this class, is that which has been also founded on the facts as well as on the history of the Mosaic and Christian religions. It is this ; that certain conditions are fulfilled in its history and existence, not consistent with its being an imposture. These I give you in the words of the writer who has stated the argument ; they are : *Firstly*—"That the matter of fact be such, as that men's outward sense, their eyes and ears, may be judges of it. *Secondly*—That it be done publicly in the face of the world. *Thirdly*—That not only public monuments be kept up in memory of it, but some outward actions be performed. *Fourthly*—That such monuments, and such actions and observances be instituted, and do commence from the time that the matter of fact was done."\*

To feel the force of this argument, you must take the whole together ; as each condition may separately be applicable to many false statements. A historic fact may be stated as fulfilling the first, without being true ; but not having occurred, it shall have produced no effects and left no monuments. An imposture may, on the other hand,

\* Leslie's Short Method.

have left its monuments, and been received and handed down as a truth; but then it was not such as to be exposed to the evidence of the senses; nor were its credentials exposed to the test of public scrutiny.

The historical facts of the Christian religion were so presented to the senses, and to the public scrutiny of an adverse community, that it could not impose on any one, if it had been a fraud. Its rites and monuments, which are such as to be traceable to no other cause but the agency of these facts, began so immediately from them, and have been so uninterruptedly maintained or preserved, as to leave no doubt as to the certainty of their origin.

Another strong argument, intimately connected in principle with the two last, is this; that the whole history of Christianity implies, in each period, the precise events of that which went before it, until we are conducted to the beginning, with inevitable force of inference that this beginning cannot be any other than that pretended to by the Christian. The continued existence of Christianity may thus be found to present, of itself, the most unanswerable evidence. It could not have commenced without the cause assigned; opposed to every reigning superstition and preju-

dice, to all the infirmities, passions, and strong prepossessions of the world, it could not have obtained toleration ; opposed to falsehood, it could not have used its arts ; opposed to worldly motives, it could not have been actuated by them. On any supposition but one, it is utterly anamalous, and a continued violation of every known principle of fact and reason.

As might be supposed from the nature of its facts, there are many distinct arguments, each proving the truth of the Christian religion : I cannot delay to state them all. But there is no fact from which the gospel derives a more powerful corroboration, than the history of St. Paul himself. He was a person well known for his learning, his zeal for the Jewish law, and his activity in persecuting the Christians. He says of himself, in his defence before the Jewish people, the whole of which you may read in the 22nd chapter of the Acts, “ And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the High Priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the Elders, from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound to Jerusalem, to be punished.” Now we know St. Paul, by his numerous writings at this day in our hands, as

well as by his history, which constitutes the greater part of the Acts of the Apostles ; from both of these sources, we know him to be a man of great knowledge, eloquence, prudence, and courage. We find him, in every chapter of this wonderful but well authenticated history, baffling, by the most consummate prudence, the arts to which his enemies had constant recourse, to bring him under the penalties of the Roman law—and pleading his own cause, and that of the faith, with a dignity and eloquence, and I may add a weight of facts and arguments, which made the governor Felix tremble ; and which drew from king Agrippa that remarkable answer, “ Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Such was the man whose sudden conversion from Judaism to Christianity we have to consider. It happened while he was in the very act of persecuting the Christians, with authority which shewed him to have been a person much trusted, and of great reputation. Now, under such circumstances, let us consider whether it could have been brought about by human means : it was just in the very beginning of Christianity, before the few first Christian converts could have acquired any power, except that which they derived from Heaven. But as to this point, we know from their history, that the other christian disciples disbeliev-

ed the conversion of St. Paul ; they knew his character, and distrusted him ; this is therefore out of the question. They had nothing to do with his conversion, and even if it were asserted that they had, it could only have been by supernatural means, for we know that they had no other. Now if they were not the authors of his conversion, there was no one else to attempt it. The case before us then is shortly this ; we have a person of the greatest weight, wisdom, and authority, entrusted by his government with a commission against a weak and small party, who were considered as obnoxious to the laws of the state ; we must suppose him, as he tells us, attended by others, who could not of course be Christians, and who witnesses of all that occurred. Now, whatever was the cause, the consequence was his turning back from his commission, and at once becoming a convert to christianity. The fact speaks for itself. Persons of great zeal are not the persons to be converted in a day. Here we have one, under all conceivable disadvantages, converted in an instant, and from thenceforth becoming to Christianity what he had hitherto been to Judaism, its ablest defender and most powerful advocate. To use his own words, "he laboured more abundantly than all of them." He gave up power, respect, and what is

not the least, his prejudices, for persecution, contempt, and death. We may then fairly conclude, that where all the common motives of human conduct are excluded, there could have been none but that which is assigned ; we know the fact, and yet without a supernatural interference we know it to be impossible : the supernatural interference must then have taken place.

Much might be added on the head of external evidence. To the close and continued connection between the history of religion and that of the world, might be added, the constant influence its events have had upon the formation of human systems, the progress of civilization, and the revolutions of nations : insomuch, that there is much of the early history of mankind not to be understood without it, and that there is a very apparent correspondence of intent always traceable between the interests of religion and the events of the world. All things, in brief, which have the character of truth, give uniform evidence to the religion of the sacred writings. History, prophecy, testimony, the physical structure of the world, and the moral structure of man must, to the truly philosophical observer, appear to have a converging relationship to the same great central truth.

But let us now turn to that class of facts which

constitute the internal evidence. The internal evidence is that which is to be drawn from the character and constitution of the system, its instruments, authorities, modes of promulgation, and methods of working. To preserve the strictest simplicity, we will notice these briefly, under the following heads. The character of Christ, of his disciples, of the scripture narrative, of the scheme of redemption, of christian morality.

Of the character of Christ (as here considered) it will be the less necessary to write at much length, because the Infidel has joined with the Christian in praising it. The unspotted purity and sinless simplicity, on which the malignity of persecution, or the rancour of Deism has not even attempted to throw the least breath of defamation, must be far above the praise or blame of mere humanity. In the perfect morality both of his actions and his precepts, he stands absolutely alone : all parallels are utterly absurd. Nor is he less to be distinguished for this, than for that wisdom which never failed to penetrate through all the windings of the human heart, and all the hidden infirmities, vices, and self-deceptions of mankind. He “spake as never man spake,” and acted as never man acted ; and cannot therefore, consistently with any regard for the first principles of moral experience,

be regarded either as an enthusiast or an impostor. Strangely anomalous, indeed, would it be, if the best devised, the most effectually promulgated, and most generally received moral code, the foundation of all civilized morality, should be the fruit of a heated and distempered mind ; or of any source, but the very maturest wisdom. And stranger still, if possible, should it be established by the most absurd and ill-devised imposture. And when we reflect, that the death of the founder was not only predicted by himself, but made the very foundation of the whole, it is hard to find by what refinement of specious scepticism, imposture, ambition, or any personal motive can be imputed. No hero of poetic invention, or great name of philosophy, approaches even distantly the true character of Christ, exemplifying in the highest degree all perfections, and equally distant from all extremes. So that, looking no further, strict reason seems to justify what all ascertained fact confirms, the divine character joined to the sinless and unerring human.

But admitting most of this, it is common for the Sceptic to cut the knot, by affirming that Christ does not claim for himself the authority, or propose the doctrines objected to. This gratuitous dogma proceeds from the most entire ignorance of



all authority upon the subject. To attempt here to offer the whole scriptural authority on the questioned points, would be rather matter for a separate and not very original treatise. But it may answer as well, to refer you to the most cursory perusal of any one of the four gospels, for our Lord's own affirmations respecting himself ; or to some of the many satisfactory essays on the subject, which must easily satisfy you by the selection of texts which they contain. On the strength of this general reference, I will take for granted here, that on sufficient inspection, you will admit that Christ distinctly affirms the truth of the Scriptures—his own office and advent as fulfilling the promises and prophecies which they contain—his filial relation with God the Father—his power to heal, restore sight, reanimate the dead—his own immediate death and resurrection—his being the only means of approach to God—the resurrection of mankind through him—the personality and offices of the Spirit—and the powers and offices of the disciples after his departure. These points, which comprise all the rest, and confirm the authority of the subsequent or apostolical scriptures, leave nothing to the Infidel worth disputing on this head ; and apply the whole authority of the venerated Founder

of Christianity to the doctrinal system of the Christian Church.

We may now turn to the character of the disciples, as represented by themselves. The scripture narrative is remarkable for the frank representation it gives of the ignorance, simplicity, distrust, and timidity of the followers of Christ—most distinctly exemplifying in all its force the affirmation of St. Paul, that “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.” This infirmity, verified by facts, and confessed in a manner totally inconsistent with design, is wonderfully contrasted with the power, knowledge, eloquence, courage, and effectiveness of character equally indicated in the subsequent history of the same persons, as well as authenticated by the effects they produced. Such a change is equally miraculous with any other miracle, and equally indicative of that immediate agency of God, which is necessary to a revealed religion. The genuineness and authenticity of the scripture narrative having been first established,

this narrative as fully enables us to infer the incompetency of the disciples to invent or carry into effect the facts, or to invent the doctrines of Christianity; while it equally exhibits them as persons under the immediate influence of God. This being concluded, the whole of such doctrine as can be clearly inferred from their writings is established, without the necessity of further proof.

And thus we are directly led to the consideration of their writings. That these cannot be the production of fools, enthusiasts, or persons of weak understanding, is apparent from the admitted truth, depth, and practical wisdom of their precepts. That they are not the work of ambitious impostors, is proved from the fact, that they contain nothing favorable to the pride or personal interest of their writers; but, while they exhibit striking views of the greatness and power of God, very much expose the weakness and simplicity of his human instruments, as well as also to pledge them beyond all evasion, to humility, poverty, contempt and persecution. Again, they were not written for any sordid, evil, or fraudulent purpose, because their sole and uniform tendency is to establish the worship of God, the welfare of man, and the cultivation of all the purest virtues; perfect truth, honesty, disinterestedness, charity, trust in God,

and the disregard of all temporal interests as compared with those of eternity. It would be too great a violation of the known laws of nature, to suppose falsehood, folly, ignorance, selfishness, or any other assignable human infirmity, to be concerned in their production. The inconsistency is in the very highest degree improbable; and as it implies a violation of the laws of nature, must, if supposed at all, be attributed to some preternatural power: upon any supposition, therefore, the same difficulty presents itself; and leaves no alternative, but to admit the agency of Divine Power.

Besides the internal evidence arising from the tendency of scriptural morality, and the moral characters of truth, wisdom, goodness, &c. contained in their whole substance, it has been proved beyond contradiction or doubt, from numerous undesigned coincidences in the different writings included in the New Testament, both with the known history of the times and with each other, that they were both written in the alleged times, by the alleged authors, and with a total absence of all concert and fraudulent design.

Now considering all these points as unanswerably proved by many standard authorities, and not called in question by infidels, the next consideration is this. All these writers profess to have act-

ed and written under the immediate authority and inspiration of God, they profess to be the witnesses of preternatural events, on the authority of which they speak and act, and appeal to miraculous gifts and powers in themselves, as evidence to others. By what logical magic, for it must be such, can you avoid the one only inevitable inference from this strong combination of facts established beyond all controversy? The imputation of falsehood would imply the most audacious disregard for every principle of truth—of being deceived would be merely childish: you are, therefore, compelled to concede that the Scriptures really are what they profess to be, the Word of God.

It would be easy to multiply proofs; but it is needless. Faith is not the belief of the head, but of the heart; and is rather the effect of christian discipline, and the fruit of the spirit, than the work of the understanding. Where the mind is rightly disposed, where the means of grace are rightly used, the plain truth of the Gospel requires no reasons. Every line of scripture is stamped with the force of truth, in a manner not to be mistaken. Those who try it, soon feel its power within them; they find that it contains wisdom and peace that pass the understanding of man. But without the co-operation of the heart and con-

duct, the strongest proofs that ever language conveyed could produce but a mere lifeless and useless belief; the greatest miracle that ever was witnessed, were even one to rise before us from the dead, could make but a passing impression, just enough to give us a moment's astonishment, and be forgotten.

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\* It is needless to say, that I have omitted numerous proofs of Christianity: the bare statement of all such as must necessarily belong to a system of facts so largely interwoven with the history of the world, and having so many relations with the moral and social being of mankind, would require a volume. It is impossible for a thoughtful mind to reflect upon it, without discovering new coincidences of fact and new harmonies of combination, to attest design and the working of the Primal Mind.

One argument too conclusive, as well as too comprehensive in its grasp of proof to be omitted, I reserve for the next letter, to which it will be an appropriate conclusion.

In this letter I would have preferred to pursue the subject, by a distinct review of the several leading writers who may be most usefully consulted on the several subjects, with a brief statement of their arguments. I have been deterred from this course, by having been favoured with the perusal of a most able and well-digested statement of this nature, by an eminent living person. It is to be much regretted that so useful and efficient a composition should not be in the possession of the public.

Remoteness - a distance in thought in equal being  
as another of degree and away from a  
latter to another as a distance in thought.

## LETTER V.

regions of probability. The world  
is a vast being in a continuous being.

Before I enter upon the arguments to which I  
must now call your attention, it is necessary to  
bestow a few pages upon an error with which the  
question of probability has been entangled, by a  
class of reasoners whose merited reputation for ac-  
curacy renders their errors important—I mean the  
mathematicians. The important results which have  
arisen from the application of numerical calcula-  
tion to the laws of the material world, duly produce  
their natural effect, when they impress on the mind  
which is entirely abandoned to this kind of specu-  
lation, a sense of the boundless power of that subtle  
and precise instrument in the use of which it is  
habitually employed. The mind too, it is known  
by some distinguished examples of exclusive devo-  
tion to this particular class of abstract and uniform  
methods of reasoning, acquires particular habits of  
thought, not favourable to just thinking on that  
still more various range of subjects to which the  
measures of quantity cannot be applied. The in-  
tellectual apprehension, subjected to the slow of  
habit, becomes narrowed to that precise and mea-

sured scope of thought in which it is accustomed to move, and grows less sensible to relations so entirely different in principle, as those of moral analogy.

The law of numerical probability has, amongst other absurd applications, been applied by a few eminent mathematicians to the evidences of testimony, considered apparently with a view to the Christian religion. To this application I have two distinct objections—first, the mode of application has been incorrect; and second, the application itself is altogether absurd.

The word probability is so variously applied, that it can only be used with the most watchful caution. Moral Probability depends upon those definite and ascertained laws of occurrence, in the application of which proof consists. Numerical Probability is the expression of some unknown laws of occurrence, by a peculiar method which cannot in any single instance amount to proof.

Numerical probability ascertains the degree of chance in favour of one of many events of the same kind, each equally liable to occur. The probability of a complex question is deduced to this principle by analyzing it into its component parts, and submitting them separately to calculation. This method applied to past events must begin by stati-



ing the whole existing proof; if this should not be sufficient, *independently of numerical calculation*, no degree of mathematical probability can amount to proof; if sufficient, the calculation is nugatory. In fact, the proof must be stated without regard to that principle in virtue of which it can amount to proof; it must be reduced to the comparison of a number of events—not estimated according to that moral analogy which constitutes the *actual law* of their occurrence; but by a real or hypothetical enumeration of cases or conditions. The true value of such a trial is this: that when applied to known possibilities, it compares the stated conditions in favor of each—or by the comparison of actual results declares the operation of an unknown cause. As the conditions become undefined, or the cases infrequent, the results of calculation become illusory. Applied to a fact *sui generis*, the method has no truth; the cases are wanting. If the event be past its proofs are facts: these the moral reasoner may question; the analyst must admit them and impugn the principle. This occurs when it is computed whether it is more probable that a singular event should have happened, or that its evidence (however confirmed by experience) be illusory. At best, in such cases it is the barren trial of

the previous probability of an event, which may be otherwise proved to have occurred or not. From this it is evident that a statement of facts and known conditions may leave no doubt as to the occurrence of a fact, which numerical analysis may shew to be very improbable. This must occur with respect to every event resulting from a principle not applicable to common cases, or which can be said to be *sui generis*. On such, the numerical result must be contrary to the known fact. The application of this rule, when it diminishes to zero the previous probability of a fact which has occurred—which it must do in the cases of all singular events—should satisfy the mathematical adept of the fact, that the rule is misapplied. The inadequate statement has produced an absurd answer.

Laplace acknowledges in several passages,\* the inutility of the *Calculus* as applied to cases in which a complication of interests and passions combine their influences: and in another part of the same work he points out, with much clearness, the true principles of moral probability. He even observes the impossibility of applying the mathematical *Calculus* to estimate the truth of scientific results, which have been obtained by a variety of different

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\* *Essai Philosophique sur les Probabilités*, p. 87, *Octavo Edition*, 1814, *et seq.*—*Ibid* p. 177.

means of observations and methods of reasoning, and adds, "which is also applicable to historic facts." But it never seems to have entered his mind, in estimating the credit due to the witnesses of the Christian religion, (for such is his meaning, and he is so understood) that it is a question affected by all the various conditions which exempt it from the kind of trial to which he would submit it. Precise and scrupulous in applying his principles to investigations connected with science, he sets aside the known laws of human nature and the system of life, and invents improbable cases and absurd suppositions, for the purpose of making his favorite science subservient to the popular infidelity of his nation.\* With this view he narrows the subject to the most elementary conditions, by leaving out the entire question on which he infers by implication. He assumes the simplest case of witnesses testifying to an extra-

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\* Since writing the above reflections, I accidentally met the following striking confirmation of much of these, as well as of the remarks contained in a former letter:—

"As to La Place, whose nomination was a tribute paid to science, Bonaparte had quickly reason to repent this choice. The philosopher, so aptly organized for meditation, exhibited the most incredible mediocrity in business, proving incapable of conducting the most trifling affairs of government; as if that spirit, formed to embrace the system of the world, and to interpret the laws of Newton and of Kepler, could not stoop to the labours of detail, nor apply its powers to the care required of the legislator, with whose functions its possessor was invested for a very short, and yet too long, a space."—*Bourienne's Memoirs of Napoleon.*

ordinary fact; and reasoning on this with the precision of numbers, insinuates a conclusion, of the fallacy of which he was probably aware, in such a manner as to allow the reader to put his own construction upon it.\*

Now suppose for a moment this method applied for the purpose of estimating the truth of the Newtonian system. The question, so treated, would stand thus: first, considering the number of false theories, the probability against any theory; next, considering the fallacious assumptions of first principles upon which various theories have been made to appear conclusive, and the correct observations by which they seemed to be confirmed, what trust is due to the assumption of principles or the observation of phenomena? lastly, considering that the facts of astronomy are contrary to, or beyond the testimony of the senses, used in the ordinary way, what degree of credit can be due to such extraordinary and seemingly impossible facts, supported by any testimony so questionable as that of philosophers can be shewn to be.

To all this, the obvious reply should be, that

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\* It may be here noticed that this has ~~always~~ been a popular method among the infidel writers. It is the favourite artifice of Hume and Gibbon, to hint speciously some inference, which does not follow by any logical rule, knowing that the predisposition of the deistical reader is to receive the hint without scrupulous questioning; and that at worst, the careless general reader may be imposed on by the fallacy thus masqued, and suppose the argument which is seemingly suppressed.

such is not the proof on which astronomy rests, or the test by which it may be reasonably tried. The laws of matter and motion, ascertained by cautious and precise observation, investigated by the settled principles of right reason, and confirmed by the uniform agreement of calculation and observed result, establish the Newtonian theory on a basis of certainty, which renders all sceptical comment absurd—until the laws of reason and the evidence of perception are first disposed of.\* So it is with the evidence of Christianity. Founded on the ascertained laws of human nature, maintained by research, confirmed by effects not otherwise to be accounted for ; and offering to rational investigation proofs as many, as open to observation, as amply investigated, and as firmly established as any geometrical rule or instrumental observation ; this evidence can challenge and sa-

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\* Such is precisely the expedient to which Hume found it necessary to have recourse, for the construction of his sceptical theory. His argument is founded on verbal definitions, which amount to gross misstatements of the relation of cause and effect—of the evidences of perception, and of the laws of belief : so as to set aside the principles derived from experience and analogy, and substitute a purely gratuitous theory. From these he draws conclusions which destroy all force of reasoning, by destroying all the groundwork of reason and knowledge. Of this he seems always to retain an indistinct consciousness. It is a fact, which, if rigidly estimated, supplies another strong proof for Christianity, by shewing that the only means to overthrow it by reasoning, are the demolition of reason itself, the direct contradiction of the laws of human nature, and the intuitive convictions of the mind.

tisfy the most scrupulous reasoner, who is content to follow the laws of right reason with a fair and candid indifference, and abide by the result, whether according with his inclinations or not. To this consideration we shall have to return, when we shall first have looked a little more closely into the principles on which this, in common with every other subject of rational inquiry must rest.

Having noticed where mathematical probability fails, let me, before leaving the subject, mention how far it is really of importance to the furtherance of human knowledge, and how it may be said to have a connection with the general theory of probability. Though not in any case amounting to proof or disproof, it can be used to some extent to ascertain the actual law of occurrence, by estimating and expressing in numbers the comparative frequency of particular events under *apparently* similar circumstances. As such occurrences must be regulated by some principle uniform in itself, such an estimate may be regarded as implicitly containing this principle. The result of such a calculation is the enunciation of a law of general application. But in all such it is still to be remembered, that though the general statement is a truth, any immediate application is merely a statement of the *ground of expectation* in some particular instance. The mathematical

probability of events will, however, thus appear to be an important element in questions of moral probability. This I will notice in a future stage of these remarks.

Omitting, for the present, all further consideration of numerical probability, let us now endeavour to ascertain wherein the real force of moral probability consists : after which we may go on to apply it to the evidences of Christianity.

As the word has been variously employed by eminent writers, I must now state the definite sense in which I have and will here uniformly use it ; namely, to express *degrees of proof*.

Truth may be *credible* in different degrees—according to the principles of human assent—as for instance, speculative, practical, habitual. But all truths are equally true ; and proof founded on truth may also be logically valid, though it may fail to convince or to be understood. Proof, therefore, though its object is to produce belief, is yet in its nature quite independent of it. We are therefore led to consider in what consists the essential validity of proof.

Generally speaking, proof depends upon certain real or assumed\* conditions and relations of things,

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\* Upon this distinction is founded the real difference between probable and demonstrative reasoning. It is not uncommon to hear it observed by deists, that religion cannot be demonstrative. Certainly not, because the first conditions are not arbitrary or assumed—not suppositions, but facts.

according to the laws of strict reason, or the nature of the subject. But the ultimate principle on which probable proof relies, are those *ascertained* conditions and relations of existing things, which are called the laws of nature. As this subject has been involved in much perplexity by some sceptical writers, and left altogether unredeemed from it by their opponents, it is important that we should endeavor to state the question in such a manner as to meet the objections which may have arisen from the sceptical view of this principle. It would, at the same time, be inconsistent with our main purpose, or with our brief limits, to enter into all the subtle perplexities of the different ingenious writers on the subject.

The existing relations on which the whole theory of proof relies, do not in all cases *necessarily* involve the idea of cause and effect, but are yet so far similarly involved in the same difficulties, and so far susceptible of reduction to a common principle, that I may request of you once for all to understand whatever I may generally adduce on these first principles, as having the same application to the relation of cause and effect, and to every other constant mode or relation of co-existence generally included under this idea.

These relations are all indicated by the *uniform and co-ordinate variation*, which is ascer-



tained by experience to exist between phenomena, which appear together or in *succession* : the latter are more strictly called cause and effect. Thus, for example, a greater application of force, of weight, of fire, or of light, uniformly causes a greater motion, or pressure, or heat, or illumination, encreasing according to ascertained laws in each ; and this with such accurate certainty, that such effects can be encreased at pleasure, and in exact conformity with the nicest calculations. This certainty and uniformity of variation distinguishes the relation of cause and effect from mere sequence, which, by a strange infatuation of oversight, has been confounded with it by Hume. Considered in this view, it is at the same time, and by the same principle, the foundation of all art and of all right reasoning. In fact, the calculation which regulates the construction of a watch with its due regulation of various mechanic forces—or of a steam-engine, with its added applications of chemical knowledge, is an instance of both. The certain effects from the nice measurement of causes, and the nice and subtle processes of reasoning which lead to and are verified by them, most fully and adequately establish the required connections. And the more thoroughly, since you must observe that these are not casual instances of consequence, but of its uniform varia-

tion regulated *by the will*, and in unerring conformity with the minutest and most intricate reasoning.

This constant relation between trains of reasoning and these variations, is all that we are here concerned with. It establishes that relation which subsists *between causation and right reasoning*, as as applied to facts. Observation, experiment, and the conscious power of acting at will, are thus the data upon which the theory of probability rests.

Before we apply these principles to our more immediate object, it may not be unnecessary to dwell briefly on their application to those moral analogies, from which alone we can draw just inferences upon human conduct. In these, as we cannot reach to first principles (without the most unwarrantable and arbitrary assumption) we cannot, as in geometry, demonstrate; and as we cannot apply measures of quantity, we cannot, as in physical science, attain to numerical conclusions. The complication of circumstances, which operate upon the will of man, is so great; and the possibility of various combinations of the internal dispositions of mind and temperament, with the influences of other minds, and the impulses of action and position, is so infinitely varied—as to resist that precise test of experiment and observation under

similar circumstances, which gives their value to the inductions of physics.

But upon a more precise consideration, much of this difficulty vanishes. The force of moral reasoning is thus modified but not impaired. Its conclusions are applicable with less force to the individual, because they admit of wider and more numerous exceptions; but they are not less certain, when justly applied within ascertained limits. The reason is this; that the exceptions and apparent deviations from the laws of our nature are themselves included in those laws, and consequently themselves within the limits of the same moral analogy on which probability depends.

The *seeming* deviation cannot take place without a cause; which cause must itself be within the system of operating causes. But then it must be so, after such a manner as to operate only to the extent implied in the supposed contingency. For instance, it may be the law of human action, that under certain conditions one man in a hundred may act in some given manner. Now the real meaning of this is no more than that such is the law of human action, under a certain combination of conditions, some of which are unknown; and further, that this combination is *such as not to occur more frequently*. It is the enunciation of a law; though the common apprehension of the un-

reflecting can only perceive it as a contingency. In proportion as those contingencies are liable to occur, they become registered within the laws of moral experience. As they become less so, they are received as less accordant with this law; and are truly estimated as less likely to happen. And this for two reasons; first, because the occurrence of such deviations after such a limited proportion is itself the law of moral analogy; and second, because by the law of mathematical probability, the juncture of contingencies which rarely occurs is less likely to occur. What happens in one case may not be so likely to happen in a second, and may be extremely improbable in twenty. Thus one man may be killed by a flash of lightning at a given spot, and time of day; it would be thought unlikely that on exactly the same spot, day of the year, and hour, another should chance to meet the same fate. But were it to be said that precisely the same event took place under these circumstances for twelve years in succession, it would be thought incredible, and not to be reconciled to the nature of things.

Thus these apparent exceptions to a known analogy are either reducible to rules within it; or are of this nature, that though not unlikely in the individual case, they become so as the cases increase in number. And thus, the laws of human action,

though not expressible in algebraic notation, or to be fathomed by the compass and square, are as sufficiently ascertained for the uses of the general reasoner, as the more measurable laws of matter and motion. Indeed this latter advantage is more than compensated, by the added certainty which moral reasoning may derive from the principle of consciousness, which makes moral experience much more general to mankind at large, and so far as the confirmation of general laws, much enlarges the body of testimony. There is a consent of mankind, upon the whole outline of moral philosophy, which makes its first principles as sure as the principles of reason.

Thus then, the principles of moral probability are the same general principles upon which all proof soever rests, or, what is but a stronger method of statement, it rests upon the settled and ascertained laws of nature. It is thus independent of human belief, with which it has been sometimes most unwarrantably entangled, and to which it bears the relation of a cause to an effect which it does not *necessarily* produce.

Proof is the inferring of a proposition from conditions assumed or known. When referred to our principle, it consists in resolving an affirmation into some constant relation of co-existence. A known fact may, for instance, be traced to its proximate

cause or some constant correlative circumstance; or a questioned fact may be inferred from its cause; as the argument is *a posteriori* or *a priori*. Our theory includes both; but to avoid complexity we may confine ourselves to the former, which chiefly involves the proof of questions of historic evidence. Proof, according to this definition, may be both accurately and conveniently considered as the solution of certain given conditions, by referring them to some known law of being. Thus, one fact may be stated as proof of the existence of another, which it must have preceded, followed, or accompanied, according to some known law of co-existence. The existence of a proof is precisely so much probability as the proof has weight; and it is very important to observe, that improbability does not consist in the absence of proof, but in whatever real or seeming proof can be opposed to an affirmation. Thus there is a presumption against the violation of any known law of being—the statement of which amounts to the disproof of an affirmation. The reply to a proof deduced from admitted facts, must be that these facts do not imply the assigned cause, or are derived from a different cause. In cases of historic evidence, and particularly that of Christianity, in which the facts of evidence mostly belong to recognized analogies of human character and historic event; the only

method of opposition which offers any advantage to the sceptic, is the invention of some opposite or different solution for the alleged facts. The evidence of witnesses, which tend to the direct establishing the case, must be traced to fraud, folly, or fanaticism ; the document to forgery ; the monuments and institutions to the events of revolutions, the contrivances of policy, or the superstition of mankind.

With mere logical error we are not now concerned ; and upon the broad laws of human action mankind are agreed sufficiently for the purpose of general reasoning. They are and must be regarded as established upon the basis of experience ; and without this admission no reasoning can proceed a step—not to say that in the subject of our present reasoning, they are only required so far as they can be admitted as known universal facts, which no sane person doubts.

If the fact be admitted upon which an inference is founded, the only fair objection is to shew that the inference is fallacious—because either wrongly inferred, or because the fact or facts admit of a different construction. In the latter case, which is all we are concerned with, the probability is to be investigated by a comparative estimate of the two solutions ; and this with an entire disregard

as to the nature of the conclusion—a consideration utterly disconnected with proof.

Though the force of a valid proof, drawn by fair reasoning from true facts, is altogether sufficient to establish any conclusion however remote from ordinary occurrences, or difficult to be believed, yet besides its direct force, every proof has a value of a different kind. If, instead of one direct proof in favor of the same fact, there should be two, distinct from each other, it is evident that they must have the effect of each limiting the number of different solutions to be arrived at for the other ; being both statable as effects traced to a common origin, which must be so interpreted as to account for both. No solution can in such a case be the true one, but that which includes all the phenomena.

So, in the same manner, if there should be found any number of distinct direct proofs for the same fact, this species of limitation encreases in proportion—each limiting all the rest, until, like intersecting right lines, the possibilities of solution pass a certain point which alone can be common to all.

It has been laid down as a maxim by Mr. Hume, and generally assented to, that in proportion as the previous probability of any event is less, the proofs in its favor ought be more convincing. The converse of this rule is equally true ; in proportion



as an event becomes probable, it requires proofs of a less convincing kind to establish it. But as it is the nature of proof to add to this probability, it must be apparent, that the accumulation of proof has the effect of adding to the efficient value of each separate proof; for each becomes then more sufficient, as the subject of proof becomes more likely to have occurred. Thus then, every one of these proofs derives an accumulation of force from all the rest. This will be more apparent to your understanding by another method of viewing it; as follows.

All the proofs in favor of any event are to be regarded as parts of a system of consequent results, such as must have taken place as causes or effects of that event. In proportion as this system approaches to its completion, the greater is the *previous* probability of each separate part. And this, in two respects; first, that it has occurred, or is truly stated; and second, that it has reference to the same general principle, to which as a proof it is referred. Thus, if a comprehensive view of the whole consequences of preassuming the truth of Christianity were to suggest the characteristic events of its whole history, it is plain that in proportion as these events might be discovered to have actually occurred, so great should be the reasonable expectation, that the remaining events

or circumstances had occurred, or were correctly stated, or had reference to the same train of events.

Thus then, you will allow that there is not only an accumulation of force contained in the aggregate of separate proofs, but that also there is a very peculiar proof of a still higher kind, from the combination of these proofs as parts of a system. Most of these belonging to Christianity, are such in a very peculiar sense. They might be, for the most part, inferred from the supposition of its truth ; and being otherwise known as true, have a converse force of the strongest kind that the laws of reasoning afford.

This latter argument is of the same general class, with that by which design is inferred from the systematic combination and working together of parts. From the system of connected effects, a cause sufficient to account for such a combination must be inferred ; and in proportion as this is extensive, the possibility of its being other than the supposed cause decreases ; not merely on the principle of mutual limitation, but also on the principle of mathematical contingency, which excludes such combinations in proportion to their complexity.

It would be easy to illustrate the application of this rule by examples from the ordinary occurren-

ces of the world. But the evidence of Christianity, as being the most perfect, is by far the best—even had we no purpose beyond mere illustration. The degrees of probability on which men act, are not of a very high order, and cannot in most instances be said to amount to what in strictness might be called actual proof. For as we have formerly shewn, there are courses of habitual experience, upon which decisions are made according to *what is likely*, upon grounds which could not philosophically be said to be proof, and which should be justly considered insufficient as reasons for any thing not within the common course. But the question upon which we are engaged is such as to exonerate us from looking for such vague illustrations.

The proofs of Christianity are not mere circumstances, which, separately, not amounting to proof, yet corroborate and limit each other to a certain issue. They are distinct and complete proofs, each sufficient in itself to establish it on the high grounds of rational certainty, and any one of which can only be got rid of by assuming something more improbable to have occurred. They are *proofs*, not *circumstances* together amounting to a proof.

Before we pass to the application of this theory to the estimate of the comparative value of proofs,

we have to take some notice of the question which has been sometimes raised, as to the prejudice which proof may receive from the nature of the conclusion.

A plain *impossibility*—that is to say, where some *contradictory assertion* is manifestly involved—is not merely sufficient to outweigh any proof, but such can properly speaking *have no proof*. Such a proposition contains a self-destroying condition—and when its terms are rightly compared, resolves itself to nothing. It can only be maintained by the abuse of language and the double senses of its terms. But any attempt at proof drawn from the law of moral probability, which is no other than the nature of things, must be a misstatement of some principle. That there may be a proposition asserted and received, which involves some impossible condition, is not therefore a limitation to rational probability.

But a proposition which does not involve some impossible condition cannot be said to be essentially improbable, though actually it may be objected that it has no proof; if so, in point of fact, it wants probability. Or it may properly be affirmed, that it is *unlikely* to have occurred, or that it is not easily *credible*. This is the case when it is, or seems to be, opposed to some known law of nature;—which is a *prima facie* proof against

it, or when it is not sanctioned by common experience; which though not proof against it, yet renders it less credible to human assent.

But any thing that *can* have occurred may be reasonably submitted to the question of proof, and the lowest degree of proof is sufficient to outweigh any degree of incredibility or antecedent unlikelihood: *as such cannot amount to proof.*

But the question occurs: suppose the alleged fact, though not impossible, yet to be opposed to some settled law; is it not so far opposed to the principle of probability, as here laid down? is not the very fact of such opposition, actual proof? It must be so admitted. But liable to the condition of all proof; to be examined, and to have only that value which it is found to contain as *part* of a combination; which may contain other conditions such as wholly to alter its value or application. It is, for instance, contrary to the law of experience, that a great city should in a few hours fall into entire desolation—the statement of an earthquake would entirely alter the case, preserving the truth of the same proposition.

The error most usually committed on the class of questions here described, is to refer them to a law of being or analogy, different from the true one. A miracle is by its *definition*, excluded from the application of natural laws, and the analogy of

experience. It is directly referable to supernatural power alone; and when thus referred, it falls at once within the ordinary rules of deduction from causes, and becomes simply neither more or less than a question of fact, to be proved by similar reasoning and the same evidence.

To apply this to the question more immediately before us: it is to be admitted, that a miracle must, from its very definition, be liable to the objection last described; and that the presumptive proof against it may be such as to require stronger proof. But this can only apply so far as the laws of probability and the rules of right reasoning require. First, the previous probability of a fact must be estimated by reference to its own peculiar law of being; and this is enough to answer the objection stated above. This is to be effected by distinguishing the case in question. A miracle performed by a competent power, for a sufficient purpose previously probable in itself, is previously probable—*independent* of posterior proofs, and, instead of *more*, requires *less* of such, than any common historic fact not similarly ascertained. It is only when a supernatural event, not redmissible to such an analogy, is stated, that the difficulty occurs. It may then be objected, that the laws of nature are opposed to such a fact, and that experience does not confirm it. Such amounts to proof

against it, to be outweighed or not by the proof in its favor. If it were asserted that a certain person had by a word or touch restored a dead man to life, this assertion, not involving any absolute impossibility, would yet be opposed to our knowledge of the powers of man, and the nature of life and death—the statement of which principles would be so much disproof. But if it were affirmed that God, for certain purposes in themselves rendered probable, by their consistency with the history of the world, had invested that person with such a power, the nature of the proposition would be altered. For the precise consistency with such reasonable principles would make the fact previously not improbable, by assigning a law of being under which it might be expected to occur, notwithstanding the known laws of nature. That an interference with these should at any period have occurred, is but a consequence of admitting the existence of a Governor of the world. Any single instance becomes, therefore, not antecedently improbable; and the lowest degree of proof must outweigh the mere objection of improbability, derived from an inferior rule or law of nature.

But there is another view of this particular application of proof. From the definition of proof, it must evidently appear that, if proof is established in favour of a miracle, this proof must itself be

an inference from the known laws of nature. If, therefore, the miracle be not antecedently improbable, the inference from the lowest degree of proof is more likely to be true, than the miracle to be false; for the falsehood of the inference would be the violation of a law of nature, and the truth of the miracle would not.

But, in truth, the very existence of many things is such as to imply the previous agency of preternatural power. Without such, most of the changes which are known to have occurred in the physical system of nature, could not be accounted for; and nothing more strongly illustrates this position than the history, monuments, institutions of Christianity. The facts of the establishment of Christianity, as well as the monuments that subsist of it, are such as to imply, as a direct consequence, that there should exist numerous authentic historical documents of its origin and primitive history. Their existence is not merely previously probable, but an inevitable consequence. And again, they can be accounted for in no other way that is consistent with the rest of history, than by attributing them to the times and persons generally assigned for their production. For the forgery and the first reception of such leading documents could not fail to have some record by which it might be detected; did not here speak of the



abundant evidences of the genuineness of these histories, because I am only viewing it with reference to the argument before us: but I cannot avoid observing, that if all those evidences were suppressed, the independent proofs of Christianity, when rightly stated, together with their internal evidence, would be enough to establish the sacred writings; for as it would be easy to prove that some *such* must have existed, so it would be still easier to establish by the soundest reasoning from their style and matter, that *these* must be the genuine ones. Their proof therefore is not, as has been supposed, on a level with that of all ancient documents in general. For in many such cases the document is itself the sole ground for even imagining the existence of the facts which it records; but on the contrary the proof of these begins from the effects, monuments, and general history of Christianity. Whether they may have been in some degree adulterated is a different question, and rather affects them as repositories of doctrine than as history. As history, they *must* have been written, been preserved, and cannot be spurious, without requiring improbabilities of the highest degree, to account for genuine documents not having been produced, for their being lost, and for the pretended substitutes. The principle of all the certainty here specified, is solely that

force of consequence by which one fact implies another, either previous, concomitant, or subsequent, as cause, consequence, or some such ascertained relation.

It would be an easy task to exemplify the principles here laid down, by a distinct analysis of the separate arguments for the Christian religion, which have been but loosely adverted to in the last letter. But such, in fact, has virtually been the method observed by those who have stated and maintained them; and it is for this reason that I have stated this theory, without entering into various refinements, which in a systematic treatise, might be required to guard against confusion and captious objection. The examples are so known, and have been so fully discussed, that they could hardly fail to occur to the intelligent reader as illustrative of these principles. We may take, for instance, the testimony of the apostles and the evangelists; as being well known, it may be briefly referred to this theory. The histories of these persons must either be spurious or genuine.

They cannot be spurious; first, because they want these marks and circumstances which belong to spurious public documents. They contain nothing favourable to any known human motive, for fraud; and for such a fraud in particular. They contain every principle opposed to fraud, and to

such a fraud, in particular. For while they inculcate the severest principles of truth, they also exclude all motives in which human passion can be concerned, consistently with any known laws of human nature: next—they cannot be spurious, because it can be shown that they could not have been forged in the first ages of the Church; and further, it can be distinctly proved that in after ages the tendency of ecclesiastical bodies has not been to promulgate, but to supersede and suppress them; so that while such works as the Decretals were forged, the forgery of such a book as the epistles of St. Paul would have been indignantly traced. This is the solution from the supposition of their being spurious fails, while that of their genuineness is warranted by the same mode of trial—a reference to *circumstances*. They could not be spurious, because they can be generally traced beyond the times in which such a forgery could have taken place; they are referred to and cited by the earliest writers, and are ascertained to have been carefully preserved and publicly read by Christian communities from the very beginning. The same considerations similarly applied establish the testimony of the witnesses—all the suppositions which can be made on the principle of fraud are utterly inconsistent with the facts, and with all that is known of the nature of either individuals or public bodies; while the

admission of their truth terminates in the known first principles of our moral and intellectual nature.

Were we, with Laplace, to apply the law of numerical probability to this case—if fairly applied, it gives the strongest confirmation. For while, *as a singular event* not referrable to natural causes, the rule has no legitimate application; if applied to *its evidence* fully and fairly, it must demonstratively establish that such a combination of circumstances as the assumed fraud would require, could not exist within any limits of contingent probability.

When, however, we turn to view along the whole line of proofs for the Christian Religion, we are at once met by a fulness of evidence, which has no existence on any other subject. Interwoven with the entire history of the world; as well as with the whole of our knowledge of ourselves and our kind, and all just deductions of reasoning from the best known facts, Christianity presents its evidences, broad and deep founded, on the very foundations of our knowledge and first principles of moral certainty, so that it cannot be moved while they remain, or abandoned *coisistently*, without leading to universal scepticism.

This argument has been partially anticipated in the former letter. I will now endeavour to state its outline, with as much distinctness as consists

with the summary style which I have been obliged to adopt.

Though, as far as I have had the means of learning, it has not been discussed as one argument; it is yet composed of steps, which not only admit of the highest moral and circumstantial proof, but which also, for the most part, have been separately discussed with the utmost ability; and placed beyond the range of all reasonable doubt. It is to this is due the possibility of summarily and briefly offering the sketch which I propose. Though susceptible of the most extensive and variously branching details and divisions, it may be compressed into a few primary heads. The proof of the existence of design in the creation of man—of a moral plan and providential government—the necessity of a revealed religion—the essential conditions of such, and the probable means by which it should be made known, together with the fact that such means *actually exist*, in such a manner as to satisfy and confirm these *previous conditions*, which both require their existence and make it antecedently probable—such are the steps of that argument, which proves Christianity by viewing its external system.

On the the first of these heads, there is little room for original remark. Design, so far as it can be inferred from the physical system of the world,

or from its various phenomena, has been long placed beyond the range of reasonable scepticism. The denial of it is never heard aloud within the strict pale of philosophic disputation; and even only, when it occurs, be referred to the harmless but unhappy eccentricity, which calls for pity rather than argument. It is true, that in one respect the field is and must always continue open to further inquiry—not to shake that which is immoveably fixed, but to add new and beautiful confirmations, to increase the confidence of faith, and extend instruction to the lowest order of understandings. As the mind advances in its progress, the increase of knowledge and the enlarged compass of reason must even more broadly and distinctly present these evidences to the reflection of thought. The field is boundless, and the combinations of truth infinite in number. Perhaps among all the indications of overruling mind to be observed in the natural world, there is none which offers so interesting a grasp of this great first truth, as the mind itself; and especially when contemplated in relation to these very inquiries. The complex but wonderfully harmonious combination of that great moral and intellectual creation—the passions and sentiments, so uniform in their laws, and so various in their combinations—the faculties of reason, so remarkable for their separate func-

tions, and for their united grasp of power and consent of offices—the laws of sympathy, which cement the crowd into a common will—and the law of self-regard, which offers the no less conservative counteractions of individual interest, altogether offer a system as perfectly indicative of moral, as the solar system of physical design.

Again, the peculiar character of this design is as forcibly indicated. The natural tendency to fear, and trust to, and acknowledge an overruling mind as a source of law and an object of adoration, forms so much of the constitution of the moral nature of man, and is at the same time so extensively combined with the foundations of social order, that it cannot be fairly viewed without an acknowledgment of the probability, that man is designed to be the subject of a moral government, and a law emanating from the parent mind. It is a fact no less beautiful and affecting, than replete with instructive inference, that the highest, profoundest, and most powerful faculties of mind, have uniformly been employed to trace out the marks and evidences of its parent source in all things—that the main arguments upon the subject are coeval with the earliest records of reason—that philosophy has derived its ultimate principles from it, and made it the object of its first inquiries—that it forms an essential first principle, the only stable

and universal rule of conduct, and has been the only common source of human hopes and fears, as to a future state, through all ages and nations. That all the worth and wisdom, and every sober and practical faculty of the mind—and this more unequivocally in proportion to the progress of real knowledge—has ever consented to a purer but more distinct acceptation of its laws and great truths. Nor is it here to be omitted, that in proportion to the progress of all truth, these have also become proportionably nearer to the standard presented in the whole of Scripture.

From this fact—considered as a link in the great chain of truths already traced out—another consideration arises with great weight of interference. The universal tendency here noticed, must have its final as well as its first cause. The direction of mind, which came from the source of mind, and which returns to it, must, like all other things in nature, be so constituted for some purpose, and with relation to some great ulterior plan. It is obvious how the reasoning from this point branches off into the speculative proofs of a future state. Our immediate line is different; nor are we, at this point, concerned to draw the conclusions which it presents, as to the nature of the probable system of divine providence, or as to the probable disposition of events in accordance with the prime intent



thus indicated: these considerations offer themselves with greater force of evidence, and on a broader foundation as the argument proceeds. But it is enough here to observe; that from the inference of the *mere existence of any plan*, such as may be inferred from the above mentioned premises—that is, any plan of moral government—the next unavoidable inference, according to the ascertained laws of reason, is, that there *must exist also a divine revelation*. For without this the rest is utterly absurd and unaccountable; man never has been governed, and is not constituted to be governed by speculative principles—but by sense and the impositions of law and habit. It may be granted, for argument at least, that in a few remarkable instances, some peculiarly constituted persons have attained some moral convictions of divine truths, by force of thought, and realized them in conduct, by strength of character. If this be admitted, it only serves to confirm the same argument; as the moral intent of man's formation must be in some way indicated in his mental constitution. And it is thus ascertained that the highest degree of perfection known to be attained, is but an approach to certain indications only to be found practically applicable to mankind in revealed religion. For it is certain that *no community* of any age or nation has been influenced by such dis-

coveries. The law of the Creator must have been an *expressly promulgated* law.

From the inference last mentioned, the next step follows with equal conclusiveness. If there has been an original promulgation of divine law, such as to form a consistent part of that plan which we have already assumed, this revelation must have been so preserved, as to descend through all time, preserving such a continuity of existence as its first intent required. As to its exact accordance with this first intent, we cannot reason; as we have no means of inferring by any argument *a priori*, what it may have been. The social system, while it strengthens the conclusion in favour of moral design, affords little aid in conjecturing as to its precise character; and it is only when we shall have taken revelation itself for our guide, that we can arrive at any reasonable conclusion on that point. Our reasoning here, therefore, goes no further than this—that a continuity of existence, accompanied by sufficient evidence of such, must be a distinguishing mark of the authentic law of God, delivered from the first of time. Thus then, three important steps are attained—the high probability of moral plan and providential government, the necessity of a revelation, and the distinguishing criterion of a continuity. Upon this last point we must add a few more remarks of very considerable importance.

All moral and providential scheme necessarily implies the existence of some continuous line of events or efficacious principles, whereby the different revolutions of the moral world may be connected as parts of the same system; this is the necessary condition of any plan or system of design. Now, though it is by no means essential that we should be able to detect this principle in the history of nations and institutions; yet if such can be traced throughout, from the earliest records of history, there is a strong presumption in its favour. This presumption gains much added weight, should it be the only traceable instance. But if, in addition to these accrediting marks, we find not only that it bears *in itself* the plainest marks of being actually such a first principle, but also that we are led by an independent train of reasoning to the conclusion, that such is an essential portion of the moral scheme as it actually exists, so that it cannot but be incomplete without it; the chain of evidence is then so perfect, that its force cannot be evaded without the denial of some known fact or established first principle. The *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, the antecedent probability and the facts, so concur, that the false analogies of the sceptic and the misrepresenting and partial statements of the dogmatist are repelled along the whole line of an argument, which thus

includes all the question, and accumulates all the elements of right reason on every point of it. The obvious fact of the existence of a moral plan; the probability of a revelation as a necessary portion of it; the necessity of some continuous principle; the compliance with this principle in one series of phenomena only, and *that* an actual revelation, supported by the very highest order of historical evidence and internal probability, constitute an accumulation of proof which leaves nothing to be desired by its friends, or demanded by its opponents.

We are therefore possessed of a system of probable facts, deduced from or connected by the simplest and most self-evident rules of moral analogy. The only reasonable conclusions which can be arrived at, with respect to the design of the moral and intellectual world, are to be reached; and all the great questions which arise upon accurately viewing the history of mankind, are to be solved by the known existence of a series of facts—without which all would remain a mere jumble of confusion.

First: from the central obscurity of the earliest and most unlettered ages of the world, we have the Mosaic history, the earliest known record of man, which offers to the philosophic historian precisely that series of facts which the only rational

hypothesis, would require a history according with the known state of mankind—a revealed religion suited to the periods in which it was promulgated, and authenticated by all the means which the laws of probability admit of or demand; the supernatural signs of divine power, the evidence of institutions; and, lastly, a fundamental concord with the true physical economy of the natural world, such as divine revelation alone could have attained in those dark eras.\* Thus, in the very outset, affording the required fact of a divine revelation, attested by the least doubtful marks of its origin; and, otherwise wanting, no evidence that such a revelation should have, if regard be had to its intent, or to the character of its history and institutions.

Next, in the lapse of ages, when the changes of maturer times—the expressed design of religion—the dissolution of elder nations and institutions, and the formation of new, appear all to have required it, a second revelation, suitably attested, by the only conceivable means consistent with its express design, makes its appearance to mankind—endowed with larger adaptations, and contemplating the moral character and moral wants of further and more enlightened times; which it soon

Evidence of Christianity, by the Earl of Ross.

became the efficient instrument of developing from age to age, through near two thousand years; through which time, all things have changed but itself. A strong fact, if considered in relation to the similar fact of the duration of the former series of divinely instituted religions, in such a manner as to shew the existence of that uniform principle of continuity which we have already noticed; and which can be traced in nothing else, unless in that material system which the same Primal Mind has fixed over the depths of the illimitable void.

In this second institution, we are also enabled similarly to trace a wonderful foreknowledge of events. It was indeed utterly impossible that any human intellect could have looked so far along the varying course of ages, to see beyond the wrecks of all existing institutions, empires, and human conventions, what were to be the precise effects and workings of christianity, in times so widely different. Yet the most cursory and sceptical reader of the New Testament can scarcely fail to notice the peculiar insight which it shews into effects, the very elements of which may be said to have grown out of the after changes of the world. Such, not to enter upon the detail of facts which are to be found minutely stated in many innumerable works on Christian evidence, is the great chain of facts, answering to the precise re-

acquisitions of that degree of antecedent probability, which arise from the combined view of the system of known relations of existence. First, the actual indications of divine intent, next laws, precepts, and institutions of divine precession—permanent in form, and answering the supposed objects; and lastly, a system of doctrine exactly corresponding to the same design, but such as evidently not to be of human origin.

Such is the great outline of a system, which so fills the history of this world, as to hold the place of its main object; which morally and historically occupies every important portion of the records of time, and has its foundations broad and deep beyond the knowledge of man to circumscribe previously probable—and subsequently proved at every step; and giving the whole weight of all its facts and evidence to the analogy upon which each of its minutest proofs is built. So that to any one, who is capable of perceiving the moral order of this world, it is as much the established order of things as the alternations of day and night. And the most extraordinary miracle, which can be traced to a plain connection with the promulgation of Christianity, is as probable in its course of ascertained events, as last week's sunrise in the calendar.

A few sentences will recapitulate the contents of

this letter. Probability is defined as expressing the degree in which proof can be applied: proof, as the testimony derived from facts or conditions, according to the known relations of things, or what is commonly understood by laws of nature. *Previous* probability is the inferring of unknown facts from these first principles: *posterior* probability is the referring of known facts to them. Proof accumulates, so as to increase the value of its separate parts. Proof may be so various, complete, and comprehensive, as to afford a peculiar independent evidence—here called, *evidence of system*. The most singular event, if previously probable when referred to its *appropriate law*, is more likely to be true than the lowest degree of proof to be fallacious. The highest degree of proof cannot be fallacious, upon the principles of probability. *Christianity offers this highest degree*. Thus evidenced by the whole of a great established system of things, the history and evidence of the Christian Religion must stand or fall with the first principles of probable reasoning. If it be false, there is no knowledge true; even the evidence of yesterday's best attested facts cannot be so strongly established upon all the grounds of rational belief. The very sense may, it is known, deceive: and if the infidel philosophy be right, all is reduced to the hallucination of the passing hour.



But if there be any grounded principles of actual existence ; if the best attested facts have any claim on rational belief, and the plainest laws of reasoning are not altogether illusory, it is in the highest degree improbable that the Christian religion should be other than it professes—divine truth—

If this fail,  
The pillared firmament is rottenness,  
And earth's base built on stubble.

THE END.

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